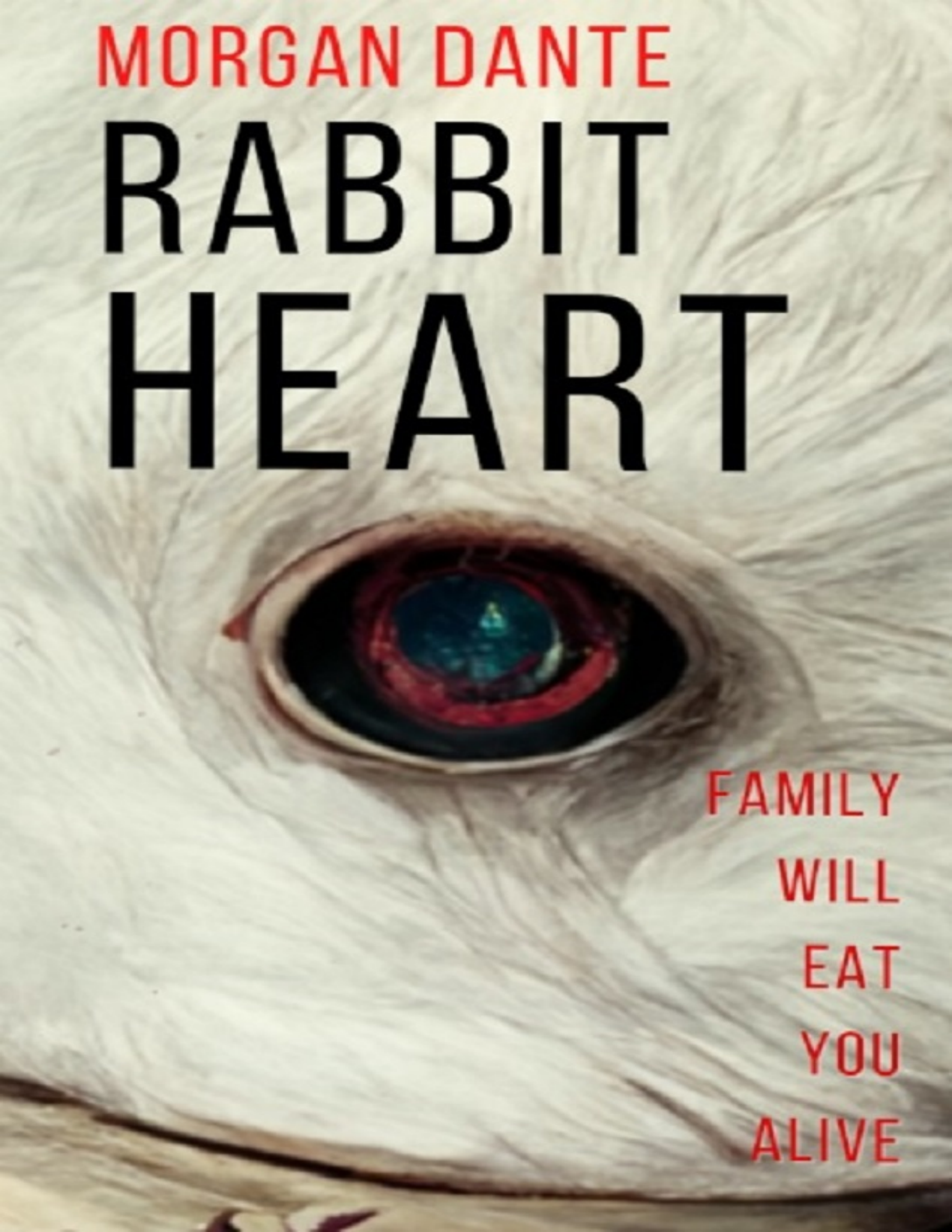
MORGAN DANTE

RABBIT HEART



FAMILY WILL EAT YOU ALIVE

RABBIT
HEART

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1

TODAY WAS RACHEL'S first hunt, and she needed to be ready. She swallowed and forced her damp hands to stop twitching. Tried to. With her thick wool gloves, the sweating was harder to manage. She felt like a swamp. Hot, sticky. Mosquitoes burrowed under her palms. Her dull and heavy teeth were like rows of cypresses curved wrong in her head.

Stop shaking. You look like an idiot. She was being ridiculous. This was no big deal. Her adoptive parents—her saviors—did this once or twice each year. It was good, getting food and clearing out overpopulation. They were doing good. They would keep her safe. Everything would be fine. That was what they said, and she had to believe them.

"How many times have you done this again?" Rachel asked, adjusting her scarf for the millionth time.

The fire in the stone mantel roared behind her. An answer, a promise of what was to come. She bowed her head to stare walleyed at the green living room rug, swearing she saw stains she'd never noticed before. She blinked, and the dark spots faded. This time of year, the rug was the most green she'd see till next March. If it weren't for the hearth, her thermal pants, and the cabin's insulation, Rachel and her adoptive parents would've been popsicles years ago. If there was anything she missed about Atlanta, it was that she'd never felt like she'd stick to an arctic toilet two hours north of the city.

She smoothed her hands through her springy hair.

Stop. Shaking. Behind Rachel and her mom Linda, her dad Marcus sat on the multi-threaded couch. He set out the bow, arrows, and two toothed knives. Linda's smile was a honeyed scythe. It fit well with her warm eyes, shining gold, and lightly crinkled brown skin. "Sweetheart, everyone's nervous their first time."

Rachel groaned. “You had to say that.”

“You only need to track the buck or doe. Don’t worry about the rest.” That was easier said than done; they had taught her it was better to track in the snow, and none had come. With a contemplative frown, Linda tugged on Rachel’s brown wool jacket, drawing both ends together. “You need to zip this up, dear.”

“It’s fi—” Rachel sucked in a breath when Linda zipped the jacket from her navel to her chin.

Linda stated, “The fabric’ll catch on briars.” “And low branches,”

Marcus added.

“If you’re not careful,” Linda finished, tilting her head.

Rachel leaned over to glower at Marcus, but he was preoccupied with counting arrows. Arrows. This was Georgia. Surely, they’d heard of guns, maybe a little. *How many are we killing again?* “Fine.”

They wore winter boots and long, striped scarves Marcus had crocheted. They were thick, soft, and sharp-but-sweet with the faded smell of his cologne. Dark jackets cocooned them all—Marcus’ a camo-green, and Linda’s a violent maroon that looked harsh in the pale, dwindling sunlight streaming through the windows. Somehow, Rachel imagined Linda didn’t worry about her clothes giving herself away. It was more shocking seeing Linda’s hair pulled back and not rolling down her shoulders in thick, black curls.

As she grew into herself, Rachel looked more like Marcus than Linda, despite her gender and curly hair. (Why was she making that comparison? They weren’t . . .) While Marcus’ hair was tinted gray and blunted, they had a similar dark skin tone and similar brown eyes, as opposed to the amber glint in Linda’s eyes. Marcus reminded Rachel faintly of Mama—the mama she had before all this—with her Afro-Cuban heritage. If it weren’t rude and intrusive, she’d ask more about his heritage, the painful past.

Mama and Papa bleeding on the cold kitchen tiles. My hand by the table leg . . .

Rachel’s own heritage was fuzzy. She was black, happily so, but her past, her history, had been stolen from her like her virginity. All her identity had been to certain people was a marker of how she was different, how her white foster parents could push her around at the next church barbecue as

proof of *wow, look at these good, godly people with their three boys in the choir and a diverse, needy, "challenging" child*.

Squeezing her hands together, Rachel said to Linda, "Are you sure there'll be any deer out?"

Linda replied, adjusting Rachel's scarf, "Of course. This is the time they all flock to the woods—rutting season." Linda's lips curled in distaste.

Rutting season is in early December, not late. Rachel swallowed her reply. What Linda said was playful, leaning too hard into acknowledging what they were about to do. It didn't matter. She wouldn't be doing the *real* hunting, the final blow. What mattered was that in the bitter, rain-slicked woods, she'd find them food before night fell with a darkness that eclipsed every tree.

Find food. So they could kill and cook it. That was it. No wasting anything.

All she needed to do was find their prey. Everything would be swell.

Yes, reassuring.

"You're sulking," Linda said, voice a lilting sigh. "No, no, it's okay. It's always okay. What is it?"

Rachel straightened and sucked in her bottom lip. "I'm fine, Mom."

"Rach." Linda craned Rachel's chin up, using the other hand to brush away stray hairs. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

No.

I don't know.

If she ducked out, she doubted Marcus would protest. Even though Linda wouldn't force her to do anything she didn't want to do, Rachel couldn't face disappointment from one of the only people in the entire universe who cared about her. One out of two, still alive.

Rachel swallowed. "Tomorrow'll be the anniversary of when you adopted me." Four years. "I want to help. I should help." Linda wanted a special dinner, something the three of them helped catch and make, and Rachel was eager to please, eager to cement her place. When she offered to help, Linda beamed while an indistinguishable glint flashed across Marcus'

eyes, and he bowed his head; she tried to tell herself it was the firelight reflecting off his glasses.

Done sorting all the weapons on the couch, Marcus stood. Impulsively, Rachel crossed the distance and rested her cheek on his jacket, wishing she could feel his warm, flannel shirt. He smelled of a tangy aftershave.

You need to do this. Rachel wanted Linda to assure her that she was welcome without being useful, without helping them kill something. She wanted her parents to usher her into the bedroom, wrap her up in blankets, and dismiss her painful need to prove herself continuously worthy of their love. A communion, culmination, consummation for herself.

Instead, Linda beamed and patted Rachel's shoulders. Though her hands were small, it smarted when they landed.

After a long silence, Rachel said, "Tomorrow's anniversary should be ours, not theirs." It was a statement that only made sense to them, to the ghosts in the walls.

"Good," Linda replied briskly, breezing past the subject matter. Rachel was grateful. "You'll make the world a better place. There's always something special about a family hunt.

When Marcus and I downed our first kill, it was intoxicating. We almost __"

Marcus paused. Rachel wrinkled her nose, saying, "Ew."

"But we didn't. Everything is much more powerful with abstinence." *Good to know, I guess. Not that it matters to me.* "Anyhow, Marcus, is everything ready?"

"Yes," he said, looking up.

Rachel thought they'd go now, but before she could make her way to the door, go outside, Linda cupped her shoulder. After sprouting in her adolescence, Rachel was about a foot taller than Linda, so Linda had to look up at her when she muttered, "It's times like these I remember how much you've grown."

Echoing the sentiment, Marcus said thickly, "You look very grown." She shifted. "Thanks. Mom, Dad." Those words were strange on her tongue, as strange as their words on her ears. She had changed into a whole different person and had stagnated all at once. It wasn't as if she went to many places

beyond the woods, the cabin, and the closest town, Pendlewood, fifteen miles away.

Beyond the drive into town, she didn't follow the gravel to the road; she had no interest in being seen by outsiders, as curious as it made her. She didn't do anything in the real world without her parents. A small part of her wondered what it'd be like to talk to someone her age.

Probably as awful as before. And if they'd think of her as mature as her parents believed her to be. *Probably not.*

The screen door screeched like an owl, like an omen. The cold hit her, the sharp promise of snow, one that halted the world and burned her nose. It made her miss the heat inside.

"Be careful," Marcus said, a quiet tempest in his eyes. "Watch your step. We'll be close behind."

The winter day casted a gray pall over the dull browns of the molted birches. The usually beautiful-from-a-distance copses were ugly in their blunt, naked limbo.

Chittering in the trees. Leaves moved, the murmur of the post-rain wind when it shunted against the branches.

Marcus said, "We won't let anything happen to you."

Shivering, Rachel released a long breath and kept going forward. "And if I get into the trouble, what do I do?"

Linda squeezed her shoulder from behind, and it felt good, this safety. "If you need us, if we're separated, scream, duck, and aim for where the sun doesn't shine."

Rachel nodded, picturing Linda's smoothed brows and lips set firmly. Throat thick and scratchy, she didn't want to show weakness. "There's just one thing."

"What is it?" Linda asked.

"You know." Rachel squeezed her eyes shut. "I can't see any blood. Please."

Linda nodded. "We'll do our best to make sure you don't see any, dear."

As they walked deeper into the woods, her parents were fast, and the exertion made Rachel's ears hot, her belly like a heated, iron cask full of yellow jackets.

Something shuffled to the left of her. She paused. Footsteps. More than there should've been.

Two, there are two of them. Rachel slid forward, doing her best to ease on to the cold dirt instead of the dead leaves. She looked behind her, motioning to her parents. Linda began to prepare the bow and arrow. Marcus steadied her.

When they continued, sliding between the briars—

Rachel's breath caught. There he was, a buck, and a doe merging into the brush, leaving him to his fate. If they didn't hurry, if she returned—how did one capture two at once?

Part of her hoped they didn't kill the doe. But the buck—he was big.

He'd feed them for days.

It seemed as if they stood under the dark, bent trees for an hour as the buck scuffed along the hard ground, tilting his head. A bulky, furred string of muscles. She remembered the menacing strength even the smallest buck could have, even with those gentle eyes. Rachel didn't know if they'd find the doe again. That'd complicate things.

"Close your eyes," Marcus whispered in her ear, suddenly close. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She could smell the soaked earth.

She realized Linda had loosed the arrow when the buck emitted a shrill keen. The arrow hit the buck in the abdomen. He staggered once before crashing into the underbrush.

Rachel approached the clearing. On the dull, brown-red ground, where the earth exposed its gums, there was yellow and pink, like the scantest amount fat and a lot of muscle, and then—

Her breath caught in her throat. Hands on her shoulders.

Blood, there was blood. God. She needed to, if she didn't run . . .

Marcus knelt and inspected the minor viscera spill. "You clipped the guts." He sounded almost bored.

"Oh, dear." Linda came into focus. Oh, she was in front of, not behind, Rachel.

Straining against her jacket, Rachel squeaked, "You said there wouldn't be blood." *Of course there'd be blood, you idiot.* Her words weren't

responding to her mind.

“We said we wouldn’t let you see it,” replied Linda, unusually clipped. Displeased. *With me?* “We had hoped that would down him.” Rachel swayed. “Rach, shh, it’s okay. Look into my eyes and count to ten.”

Voice high, Rachel asked, “Do I need to say it out loud?”

Linda patted the side of her head, pulling Rachel close, so she only smelled Linda’s faint strawberry lotion. “Shh, don’t think about it.”

One, two. “Won’t it—” *Three.* “—he get away?” Rachel murmured. *Four, five.* “The blood trail”—s*ix, seven*—“will fade in, what, one-hundred yards?” *Eight, nine.*

Ten. Rachel pulled away.

Linda hummed in approval at Rachel’s approximation. Good. Acknowledgment made her warm. She’d been studying hard. “Not if it’s injured.”

“What about the other one?” Marcus said, standing. While Rachel didn’t see his face, she could only imagine the lines of his visage deepening. “There were two.”

Linda said, touching Rachel’s arm, “With any luck, she might follow, or if she’s spooked, she might be lost to us.” She waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter. One will last us several dinners. You did well, Rach.”

Rachel forced a smile. *We haven’t caught anything yet.*

“The doe,” Rachel said, the namelessness of the doe souring on her tongue, “do you think she’ll go to the . . . ?”

A ghoulish light danced in Linda’s eyes. “No.” She frowned, squeezing Rachel’s hand. “Are you okay?”

No, the thing will come here, and it’ll eat us, and I can’t protect you.
Marcus softly touched Rachel’s temple, his thumb brushing hair behind her ear. “You should go back.”

We’re a family. You’re not a chicken, are you, Rach?

“No, no, I . . . I can see where the leaves . . .” She broke away from them, trying not to grow faint when she saw where the blood led. Her heart clawed at her lungs. “Follow me.” She started to follow the trail without looking at it much, relying on the distant sound of steps clumsily stomping

on dead leaves. Her hearing had always been good, and her training for this moment only sharpened her senses.

She looked back, and Linda and Marcus were staring at one another, what seemed like a quiet war between them.

“Mom, Dad?” Those words stuck in her throat like finger bones. Marcus broke his gaze, sighing, and Linda started toward Rachel

first while he followed. Rachel smelled the water, the damp soil, and the wet leaves, after the noises. A splash, disturbed water, chkish, chkish, chkish. They went down the ravine that led to the creek, and the bubbling water thrummed in her ears. She checked where the shadows pooled and swelled. Looked for the Thing-of-the-Woods, but her parents’ quiet steps beckoned her back to the hunt.

She heard a panicked wheezing alongside the water rolling over stones. There, they found the pale buck, hunched by the creek, curled over himself like a question mark. He had fallen into the shallow part of the creek.

He saw her.

“Help,” he said, hoarse. Even for his stature, he looked tiny, beaten. The color of his hair reminded her of hay. He looked no more than twenty-five, and his eyes were blue. Rachel was dimly aware that her parents were no longer behind her, but had skirted to the side.

As swift as a January twilight, Linda descended and drove the blade in her hands between the buck’s shoulder blades. He yelped. Rachel covered her ears.

Marcus looked up to Rachel, who was still frozen on the incline. “Go.” He hadn’t been this close before, why hadn’t she seen him?

Despite herself, vile curiosity planted Rachel there, even as she moved one hand from her ear to her mouth. She squinted, so her vision blurred. Her knees weakened.

Don’t look, don’t listen. If there’s blood, the Thing-of-the-Woods will come. You need to leave. Run. Stop shaking and go.

The buck tried to scream, but when he sucked in a breath, he grimaced and clutched his stomach. Linda forced back the buck’s head, exposing his pale, freckled throat.

It was fine. Her parents treated her well, with respect and dignity, as they treated all good people; they only punished the bad ones. They were doing the right thing. *I wonder how many girls have bled because of him.*

The buck trembled and stared, and stared some more. Rachel's eyes stung.

Only when the knife began to move did she turn around and walk away, head high, telling herself the dripping was old rain falling off the branches.

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2

THAT NIGHT, WHEN Rachel was supposed to be asleep, she leaned against her bedroom door and listened to Linda and Marcus, looking through the small crack. Somewhere out in the woods, a dog barked. More joined it in the hollows, an echoing chorus.

“Linda,” Marcus said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his face. “This needs to be the last one.”

Despite her need to prove herself to them, relief flooded Rachel. She liked human meat, sure, but things would be so much better and safer if Linda and Marcus stopped killing. Really, with some more peanut butter and soy in their diets, they could go completely meatless.

Linda stared, jaw set. “Are you sure?” “Yes. We’re getting old.”

“Speak for yourself.” Rachel thought then that she couldn’t see Linda ever dying; she was death, and that comforted her.

“What if something overpowers one of us?”

Linda flicked a wrist. “We’re always together, and they can’t defeat us when we’re together.”

Marcus frowned and sighed. A hard knot swelled in Rachel’s throat.

It was the last conversation she heard between them.

The next day, hunkered atop a ravine with dirt on her hands, jacket by her feet, Rachel looked down in the clearing. Her parents prepared dinner on the grill. She had been out most of the day, appreciating a time she could walk around without yellow jackets swarming and fishing spiders invading as humidity strangled the air. Winter was underrated.

Two thoughts flashed through her mind, one instilling a tickle of fear:

First: *Mom will kill me when she sees the clay all over my clothes.* It had gotten on her white dress (always white, always innocent for them, so they wouldn't stop loving her), gray tights, and grayer coat. Hell— heck, it had even gotten in her hair.

Second: *I wonder who we're eating today.*

The second one was a morbid joke. Of course she knew. She had helped, after all, and throughout the early morning, Linda had beamed at her, proud. A trickle of doubt seeped through, a little guilt. But Rachel couldn't let it win. This was the way things were no matter what, and she was finally happy. No going back. Parents, blood or not, never changed their ways, and if she ran off, no one would love her.

Without her family, she had nothing. She was nothing.

She'd be alone. Again.

Nothing new.

I'd rather die.

Besides, Mom—Linda and Marcus only ate bad people. Rachel only ate bad people. Like Tom and Mike and—that was the past. They were gone, and she was here. Not people, deer, dehumanized like they had dehumanized her. That was unfair; she actually liked deer. Humans were animals, all the same. There was really little difference from eating deer; even Catholics, like her Mama, ate flesh and blood to worship. Rachel wondered if Christ liked being eaten.

If anything good came from lingering on the past, she hadn't found it, but she lingered anyway. Linda and Marcus, especially Linda, couldn't understand that, especially when Rachel blended reality with the paintings her mind created, the elaborate metaphors that became fact to her.

The only time Linda's eyes grew dreamy was when she ruminated on the past—on her mother, on what it was like being a first-generation American from New Delhi, a home she couldn't remember because she had been curled in the warm darkness of her mother's belly when she came to red soil that she soon learned didn't want her.

You're quite the creative one, Linda had said once, standing over Rachel as she sat, which was the only time Linda stood over anyone. The dining room had smelled of lemony dish soap, clean and bright in her mind like dove wings. Stroking Rachel's long, thickly coiled hair, Linda finished, *But*

it's all a little abstract for me. Linda focused on her medical texts and diagrams. Facts, numbers, lists. Step-by-step, no instructions missed. It all lacked an improvisational slant Rachel found enjoyable during her forest walks. A ladybug on a leaf, a butterfly swooping down, an orange-bellied robin, the woods were deep and endless, full of possibilities and secrets, stories.

So long as there was no blood, Rachel was fine, and the woods would be boring if she only saw them as a map, a set of landmarks. If she could predict everything, where was the joy of discovery?

Discovery? She clenched her fists on her stomach but forced them apart. *As if most of your discoveries have been good.* Her hands, brown and soft, took up most of her attention. Clay caked them red, a small, orange feather embedded in the mud around her thumb. Burying the two, thankfully bloodless robins in the soft earth with no tools had been painful and long, but she had felt obligated. It bothered her, though.

You feel obligated to treat birds with respect, but not people, even bad ones?

It doesn't matter. Shut up. She had discovered her new family. Love. More importantly, she found the two people who could most understand her past and her pain when others would only offer faint sympathy or dismissal. Because that was how the world worked, except for in their little cabin. Her home.

Laughter below, shuffling leaves. Linda cupped Marcus' neck and drew him into a brief kiss. Linda's purple and yellow dress floated up a little as the wind picked up. It was starkly bright against Marcus' dark skin and red, flannel shirt. Across the yard and beneath the walnut tree, a gray tomcat with large, orange eyes squatted on the grass like a moldy gourd hollowed out for birdseed, like the ones strung like wadded socks on the clothesline by the cabin where sparrows and cardinals gorged themselves like everything else in the woods.

Looking at the cat, Rachel couldn't help her fond smile. *Homie*. Named such because he, like her, had found a home. Home-y. A thick, meaty scent wafted over Rachel, and her mouth watered. The taste—it was already in her mouth. Like pork, but gamier, wilder.

My eighteenth birthday is soon. And that today is . . .

She was going to be eighteen; it’d be another number added on, but she’d be in the same spot as always. Doing the same thing. Scarlet hunted the edges of her vision, as it did when she meandered past clearings and meadows and picked wild strawberries with only her hands and the pool of her dress.

She’ll just be stuck here, indecisive and unmoving as always. Scared and wide-eyed. *How can you stand for anything when you spend your life crouching?*

She had stood up yesterday, though.

Hadn’t she?

Leaves crackled behind her like an open flame. With goosebumps prickling her arm, Rachel swiveled behind her, expecting to see the Thing-of-the-Woods. She only saw the slew of dead leaves like slain mice leading into the throat of the woods.

They’ll come for me if I don’t return soon.

She looked down at her beaming parents, embracing by the smoking and spitting grill. Looking down like Mama warned her not to, back when she had a Mama and Papa instead of a Linda and Marcus. It’d be—about a decade since Mama and Papa died bloody on the checkered kitchen floor, and after it was done, Rachel had dropped her fuzz-hemorrhaging teddy bear in the drying pool and peed herself.

Before that night, Rachel had climbed to the top of a playset behind some fast food restaurant. The air smelled like plastic, and she remembered it was one of the last times she saw Mama without her sea-blue nurse scrubs. While Rachel, seven years old going on eight, managed to climb to the top, she couldn’t bring herself to go down, even at Mama’s gentle urging.

Each time she started, she imagined herself falling and breaking her whole body. The steps became slick with water, as slippery as devil tongues. Without so much as threatening her or rolling her eyes, Mama climbed up with her and coaxed away the tears. She had smelled of fries and green apple body lotion.

Rachel wrapped her arms around Mama’s neck, burying her nose in her shoulder. *I can’t—can’t. What if we fall?*

Oh, honey, mi corazoncita, look up to Heaven for me. You'll go to Hell if you look down long enough. Down's where the Devil is.

The memory drifted like fog, fading when Rachel struggled to recall what she and Mama did after that incident. Went to the store, maybe. For what, though? And what store? She craned her chin. The sky, a gray, sunless sore, glared down at her. It reminded her of coffee thick with creamer that grew filmy after you forgot about it for a day.

If Linda kills you for messing up your dress, how long do you think it'll be before she eats you? Will she put you at the very top of the freezer? Hors d'oeuvre, the main course?

No use trying to sneak past them into the cabin, even if she followed the ruddy lip of the incline circling their home. She needed to go wash up by the creek, maybe splash water on her clothes and pray the stains magically disappeared before Linda saw them. Maybe the little sprites she saw once or twice splashing in the water would help her. After she cleaned herself, she'd retrieve her good face, the happy girl tucked somewhere within the folds of her sullied dress. She went into the woods and followed the low rush of the creek.

Unfortunately, what was supposed to be a five-minute excursion was interrupted. She froze. A person was there by the creek smoking, leaning on a large, wind-smoothed rock. A woman, specifically, with brown skin, long hair twisting down her shoulders, and a stylish, black leather jacket that didn't look very warm.

Rachel's first thought was that she wanted to be this woman, that she wanted *her*. But it was strange and uncomfortable, so she threw that aside.

People weren't supposed to come out this far, not on their property. Okay, it wasn't officially Linda and Marcus' property, but it was de facto, which counted for something. Yet some had dared to trespass, never to be seen again. At least, not whole.

The faint scent of strawberries drifted through the air with the dank wetness of the creek, which misted a little like it did after a July rain.

Here Rachel was. With someone. A stranger. A vaguely familiar someone. It wasn't right. The woods belonged to the people who lived here. No one else. Strangers were trespassing, and trespassers, well.

Weren't you once a stranger too?

The woman said, noticing her, “Holy shit, you scared me.” Rachel blinked. “Uh, hey. Have you seen anyone here in the woods?”

The first sound Rachel made was a croak. Luckily, she formed words on the second try. “My parents, that’s it.”

A sigh. “Great.”

“You need to leave.”

“What, is your name on this rock?”

“It’s not safe,” Rachel replied. “Someone could shoot you.”

The woman sighed. “I guess you’re right. My grandma’s lived here her whole life, but some things don’t change.”

“There’s that, but I mean the people here really don’t like strangers.” “I’m not a stranger. I practically lived around here as a kid.” “But is your house in the woods?”

“No. I don’t actually live here. I *practically* lived here. I’m visiting—” “Then you’re a stranger. You need to go.”

Straightening, the woman narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“I was once a stranger too, but I have people to protect me.” Who had all but claimed her in the eyes of the woods and those who lived in it. “To keep me from getting hurt. You don’t, do you?”

The woman’s brows shot up. Ash petalled down on the dead leaves. “Getting hurt? Are you okay?”

“Sure. But you know, all the—clay mounds you can trip on. Bobcats. Bears.”

“Oh, I forgot to avoid the bear police.” The woman looked side to side, hands hovering, legs drawing close. “Should I really worry that someone will try to shoot us? Like, right now? Think they’ll give us ten minutes? I have a lot of shit to do.”

Rachel’s eyes burned making direct contact, so she stared to the right. The rock the woman had sat on sloped in such a way that it came to more of a point than she first realized. “People don’t like trespassers here.”

“Yeah. Don’t I know it?” The woman sighed, brushing a stray hair off her knee. “I’ll be going soon. That rock was about to go up my—uh, scratch that.” She almost dropped her weird cigarette. “Just needed a brief smoke to clear my head. Some of this vaping shit.” Vaping? Rachel really had been

out of it, without internet or other close outside connections. “What’s New Year’s Eve without a nice walk? Like the Year Walk where you can see your future, but more sober, and no visions. It sucks.”

Rachel wanted this girl (no, woman, *but she’s really not that old*) to leave forever, to go before—someone was calling her name.

No, it was just the wind again. She was tired. Hearing things.

Someone will come; she needs to go.

But it had been so long since she spoke to someone her age, especially another woman. When she was in middle school, before she came here under an unceremonious adoption, she hated other girls. She thought she was more of a grown-up if she related to boys because everything—books, movies, comics—was made for boys, even girls, as the Good Book said. Best to play along.

The joke was on her.

As if seeing Rachel’s discomfort, the woman leaned back, face softening. She was pretty, which was weird to admit.

Rachel said, “What’s your name?”

The woman hesitated at first, but, looking Rachel up and down, said, “Davey, you?”

Rachel didn’t like being looked at in such a way, like her secrets would resurface with a sharp enough stare. “Rachel.”

A smile. A little wary, but it was something. “Nice to meet you, Rachel. I think.”

“I guess.”

Davey extended a hand, which shook, and Rachel instinctively went for it, but withdrew. “Sorry, hands are dirty.”

Davey closed her hand, and Rachel couldn’t help but notice the small poetry of her fingers going back to her palm. “S’okay. You go to school here?”

“No, my parents homeschool me.”

“Fair enough. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“You planning on going to college?”

“Uh, why?” They were literally just arguing two seconds ago.

Davey shrugged. “I need someone to talk to since . . .” Her lips drew into a thin line.

“No, I’m not. Going to college, I mean. Are you?” Her plans for herself had always been the same routine, different day. Wander around the woods, get her thrilling taste of adventure and danger, kind of. Read whatever books Linda and Marcus brought in from the Pendlewood grocery store checkout rack or checked out at the one-story library with one computer, or “terminal.”

“Already in it.”

Rachel scratched her arm and rocked on her heels. “Cool. I—I guess. What’s it like?” They had talked about basically everything now. Why wasn’t this girl leaving?

You want her to die, don’t you?

Davey shrugged. “Lots of sleepless nights and beer.”

“Partying?”

“Studying. What is it?”

“What . . .”

“Your face.”

Rachel rubbed her elbows, wincing. “I don’t drink alcohol.”

“Oh. Some religious thing?”

“No, bad experience,” she replied, curt. She crossed her arms, becoming small.

Davey’s forehead crinkled. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Rachel rubbed her nose with her knuckles, breaking off some of the drying clay on her skin. “People in general do that.”

As if to dispel Rachel’s anxiety, which would take all the world, Davey said, “I smelled something good.”

“Yeah, my folks.” Rachel cringed. “I mean, not them. Them cooking—something else.” *Smooth.* “The last time Linda cooked, she left hair in the burger patty. Not something I’d like to repeat.”

It had been yellow, but she figured that detail could go unsaid. It was the only detail she knew, even when she wanted to ask how old they were, what their names were, and how many times they screamed.

A sharp wind howled, the trees trembling; if Rachel listened close enough, she swore she heard singing. Her hair whipped in her mouth, which gaped open.

Davey shuddered. “Ugh, hair’s one of my big—when it gets into food, gah, the texture. It makes me sick thinking about it.”

Rachel’s smile wobbled as she stuffed her hands in her coat. “You have no idea.”

Davey shivered, rubbing her hands over her arms. “How are you not cold?”

“I don’t know.” She tilted her head. “Guess I was born with lizard blood.”

“You’re too pretty to be a lizard.” Heat stirred in Rachel’s throat, uncomfortable but strangely pleasant. Was she—no. “And you know they stop moving and die if they get too cold, right? Cold-blooded doesn’t mean . . . anyway, I was with someone in the woods, and I got turned around, even after years of coming here with Gramma. I went one way, and he went in another, swearing he heard something like water rustling or whatever. I’ve gone to the police—but they won’t do anything, say he just got turned around. No evidence of foul play. Kinda hard to find evidence if they won’t look.”

“Why won’t they go look for him?”

“Because they’re lazy bastards, that’s why.” That sounded about right. “They care way more about someone breaking into an abandoned store than someone who’s gone missing. Even a—or maybe it’s just me they don’t want to help.”

Rachel’s throat burned, her pulse quickening, a dull pounding in her head. “Who?”

“My boyfriend, Noah. Tall guy, blond, works out. When we—me and you—first met, like five minutes ago—uh, I acted kinda nervous.” She shook her hands out like they were wet and laughed. “I am nervous.” She grimaced. “That’s why.”

“You were . . .” Rachel clamped her mouth shut.

The doe.

Fu—great. Just great.

Davey said, “I was . . . ?”

Rachel asked, leaning back all casual-like and unsuspicious, “You weren’t alone?”

“No, I wasn’t. But he disappeared in the woods. The police—they’re so goddamned useless.” She worried her fingers in her hair. “I can’t just let him go—but it’s not like I’m going to wander the woods alone again. It was stupid the first time, but . . .”

Rachel swallowed, sweat prickling her temple, despite the cold. *You were the doe he was with. The buck—the man. The man I tracked. Shit. Shitshitsh* — She cut that thought off, aware of Linda’s presence somewhere, thinking the more she mentally cursed, the more Linda would sense her distress and swoop in. Linda was the last person she wanted to see now; even Marcus would be better. She loved Linda, but she was . . . a lot

“I’ll help you,” Rachel blurted.

“You will?”

I will? It sounded smart. Point her the wrong way and run. That would work. Wouldn’t it?

“Yeah, of course.” She wanted to slap herself. If she were alone, maybe she would. *Rachel? You’re an idiot.* Any other time, she’d stop herself and reassess her self-loathing, as she’d been encouraged to do when she blamed herself for everything. Today, no. She was an idiot.

Right now, she needed to shut down, not complicate anything. And people were complicated. “But you know, you should be careful. People are weird here.”

“People are weird everywhere. That’s why I have this.” With a hand still holding her cigarette, Davey pulled something out of her pocket and flicked it open, a knife.

If Davey was found—she had to hide. Rachel needed to take her somewhere. There were thousands of hiding places in the woods, none Linda and Marcus didn’t know about.

Leaves crackling. It could just be—

Davey started, saying, “Uh, hello, sir?”

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3

MARCUS.

Shit. Fuck.

Lanky and slant despite his impressive height, his wrists all bone. If both her parents weren't formidable hunters, she'd fear they'd sweep away with the slightest wind. Yet, as the wind whipped the trees and scattered the leaves, he stood as unmoving and indiscernible as the first night they met. How did she not hear him stepping on the leaves?

"We've been calling you," Marcus said. Light sliced across his glasses, but she couldn't tell where it came from. For all she knew, the fairies in the creek whispered in his ear, stirred him to a frenzy. Though he spoke to her, the menace in his eyes was directed not at Rachel, but beyond her shoulder.

Rachel said, "Did I interrupt your crocheting? I'm awful sorry. I got distracted." Good. Nailed it. Play ignorant. Pretend she didn't know he'd been cooking someone while she was in the woods. He'd never suspect anything. Her eyes fell to his hand, to a narrow, gleaming pocketknife. She swallowed, getting her words crossed. "I'm really sorry." Rachel lifted her hands. "She's my friend. We're friends, right?" She whipped her head back at Davey, whose brows shot up to her hairline, mouth open.

"Wha—sure, sure, I like making friends." Sweet. Rachel had never had a friend before. She thought she had, every now and again, but it all ended in betrayal. Whispers at best, and at worst . . .

Marcus looked up and down at Rachel's ruddied—everything. "Did she do this to you?"

"No, I did it. Burying birds. Couldn't just leave them."

"God, Rach, you know what Linda'll say about how red clay stains."

Davey said, "Well, I'll leave you two to chat."

Relief dared to fall into Rachel's belly and cool her spine, but it left when Marcus narrowed his eyes.

"No, stay there."

"Come on," Rachel said, lowering her voice, so Davey wouldn't hear. You wouldn't kill someone I care about, would you?"

Davey said quickly, "I really didn't mean anything by being here." With Marcus' full attention on this woman, this stranger, Rachel felt like a wet piece of wood between them. Not even her shoulder hid Davey from Marcus' shrewd, calculating eyes. Surgeon eyes.

"Do you know what smoking does to you?" Marcus asked.

Davey lifted her chin, as if Marcus had insulted her virtue. "Hey, I don't like it either. I'm trying to quit, but in the meantime, this is supposed to be healthier—"

Marcus stepped forward. "It took me years to quit, and those are years off my life I'll never get back. And you did it near *her*."

Davey lowered her shoulders, balling her hands close to herself, making herself small. "Sorry, sir, sorry."

"You lot are the most selfish, undeserving—"

A light thud behind Rachel. "I quit, I swear! See?"

Marcus scoffed, and Rachel turned to look at Davey. *Why am I not doing something?*

"Christ, I'll get it up—" A black, shiny rectangle in Davey's jacket pocket fell and collided into the ground. "Goddamnit," Davey muttered, hands shaking as she knelt, "my phone."

That's what phones look like now? They were getting smaller. In foster care, she'd never been allowed a phone, but the only ones she had held in passing flipped up and had a lot of buttons you had to press a bunch of times to spell things out. The only phone in the cabin was a landline that had been disconnected because, as Linda put it, "those godforsaken telemarketers."

Swallowing, Rachel tried to assess the situation. Linda and Marcus didn't normally target people who looked like Davey. At least, from what she had overheard.

But Davey had made the mistake of getting near her.

Marcus set a firm hand on Rachel's shoulder, his grip reaching down to the bone. And then, he let go. Brushed her off, as if nudging her away from a copperhead. Stood between her and Davey.

She should stay put. Or run off. That'd be better. No chance of seeing blood. Everything would go back to normal.

He took another step, one graceful motion.

Savoring it.

Before he reached Davey, who stumbled backwards and tripped, almost completely falling, Rachel darted between them, facing Marcus and holding her hands out. She didn't understand why Davey didn't just run, but Davey stared at her in fear.

Marcus' eyes widened, breaking the smooth, worldly expanse of his face. A breakthrough she hoped—

Looping around her, Marcus advanced toward Davey, and Rachel scrambled to his side, tugging on his sleeve. "Don't, please! Mar—Dad, Dad, look at me."

Davey started, "Hold on, shit, I didn't mean—"

"Step back, Rach." Marcus sauntered forth like Rachel's grip was water.

"Leave her alone! What has she done to you? Come on, please—*listen to me!*" His once-gentle brown eyes were dark and bright all at once, intent to kill and shutting out all else. She had rarely seen that darkness in his and Linda's eyes; they tried to keep it from her. That look was for the woods and the work room, but not for her. It was a shadow that, once it crept up and clouded their eyes, nothing Rachel could say would deter them.

Yet, for a second, he looked down at her, forehead dimpling. It was a gesture he did yesterday after the hunt, which felt like an eternity ago. "I'm sorry. Just close your eyes. It'll be quick." He tried to surge forward, and Davey screamed.

Rachel leapt, clutching the back of his shirt and pulling him back with strength she never had before today. He stumbled back, and when he went to attack Davey again, she tripped over an unearthed root and he caught up with her, slamming his fist into her diaphragm. Sharp breath caught off, she

fell, face frozen in pain. A solar plexus hit, she'd be down for a good minute.

Rachel grabbed Marcus' sleeve again and jerked him back. When he stared at her, annoyance quickly became something else. Not fear, but close.

"What are you doing?" Rachel asked. "This isn't . . ." *This isn't you*, but of course it was. It was him when he was with Linda in the woods, but Linda wasn't here. "I heard you say you didn't want to kill anyone again."

His voice was strained, eyes soft. "Rach, I saw her. She was with the one we killed yesterday." Oh God. Rachel hadn't known he'd clearly seen her yesterday; she thought only she had seen the woman. "If she's looking for him, if she's already found—I have to."

If Marcus had seen Davey in Pendlewood, he wouldn't have wanted her dead. She wasn't the sort of person he and Linda went after; she didn't look like any of the monsters Rachel had faced. But here Davey was, alone with Rachel, and a loose cog in the machine. A witness.

"You can let her go."

"If they take us away, if you're alone—this is the last one, and then we can be normal. Close your eyes, so you won't see the blood." He squeezed her shoulder, and Rachel saw a glint by his foot. Davey's knife. He was whispering to her, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, we can do our lessons, you could go back to the cabin, and I'll . . ."

When his back was to her, Rachel ran forward, shooting her arm out and grabbing the knife, standing, so she was between Marcus and Davey. As she held out the knife, he had to know she was bluffing.

He held his free hand up. "Rach."

"You wouldn't hurt me." Marcus' eyes were bright, as if he would cry. He had only done that once before. "Leave her here, and we can go home."

"I can't. She's a loose end."

Voice low, Rachel said, "She's not like the others. She doesn't even look like them."

"I know, but if she goes to the police, I—I don't care if I'm taken, but Linda—and you . . . nothing will make me accept that chance."

“Nothing? Not even me?”

“Rach, please. I’ll never—this is the last time, I promise you.”

“I can’t let you do this—I know I did before—but she—it’s different now.”

His mouth was a grim, hard line, and he stepped forward. She froze, and he put a gentle hand on her arm, moving to her side, leaning over Davey by the jagged rock. Rachel moved with him, to his side as his knife pointed down at Davey. An icicle, a pendulum with a frayed rope.

Closer to Davey’s neck, and Rachel struggled to get between them as they were half-sitting, grappling together.

“Rach—” He moved to go around her again.

Her hand jerked forward—and stopped. Her fingers were still wrapped around Davey’s knife, but they’d slid up, the edge biting into her slightly. Her eyes prickled in pain, her blood falling to the floor, a knuckle on flannel, a . . .

Marcus fell sideways, head slamming into the boulder with a sickening crack, leaving a dark smear.

Her nose was running, her hands were shaking, and Marcus was bleeding. He gripped the knife handle sticking straight out of his stomach, and his eyes were full of confusion and hurt—and then something gray, like acceptance.

“No, no, don’t pull it out, you’ll bleed out faster.” Her voice was a squeak. He was a doctor. He should know this. She needed—God, a first aid kit wouldn’t do anything. A doctor, God, he was a doctor, Linda, she was too far away. Blood was pouring from his head, his glasses broken by his leg. One of the lenses, popped out, glowered like a little broken piece of moon.

Marcus rasped, “My liver, m’already . . .” *I’m already dead.* “Good aim, Rach.” No, he was just in shock. He would be fine. Eyes glassy, he yanked the knife out and clutched his stomach, and red traced between his knuckles like ribbons. Rivers.

Down,

down,

down.

She bent to his level. The blood, she couldn’t, he was, she didn’t.

He was smiling, an upturned grimace. “Don’t . . . Linda won’t be . . . it’ll be fine, sweetheart. She won’t be angry.”

He was trying to calm her after she stabbed him God she had stabbed him he was bleeding and she needed to get Linda but Linda would know and . . .

Time passed slowly and all at once. Pupils dilating, Marcus gave a deep breath, one where she could hear his ribs shaking, and stilled.

Dead leaves crackled by Rachel as Davey, twisting, stood.

Rachel’s head was swimming, her throat tight. The world shuddered.

Davey started, “Are you—is he—”

Cradling his head against her shoulder, Rachel rocked. “Marcus? Marcus, please.” Her heart pounded in her throat and scratched it with tiny claws. Throom throom. Lower, as if the leaves could hear, she said, “Dad?”

Throom throom, throom throom. The place where she cradled Marcus’ head leaked, sticky and black, on her neck, hands. She expected his eyes to flutter open, setting a cheek on the flannel, hoping he’d reach up and hold her. The fabric felt as soft and welcoming as it always did.

Murderer.

She had killed him.

She had killed *him*.

Rachel started, “I can’t . . .”

“We can call the police,” Davey was saying above her. “Yeah, yeah, don’t look at me like that. The—hospital. He’s probably just unconscious. I’ll—Jesus, shit, I swear—”

“Promise me you won’t call anyone.” Her words fell and died like snowflakes on warm pavement.

“What do you expect me to do, leave you with—” “I expect you to survive. So go.”

“Really? You can’t be—we need help. You need . . .” If Rachel needed help, she had Mar—God, Linda. *This isn’t real.*

God.

Of course it’s real, you idiot.

God.

He couldn’t be dead.

He wasn’t moving. So much blood.

She couldn’t, couldn’t . . .

Rachel licked her lips. A scream swelled in her lungs and stayed there. “Linda and I will handle this, and then we’ll call the cops after what he tried to do. Just leave. It might snow soon. Don’t want you to get colder.” She refused to look at Davey. Only the red flannel, the sticky, hot blood on her hands.

Voice high and unsteady, Davey said, “Colder? That’s not a priority right now. It’s not right to just leave you.”

“Go, please.” A pause, nothing. “Go!”

Davey reached out, the last thing Rachel saw through hooded eyes. “Thank you!” She burst into a run so hard her boots kicked up the cold-hardened dirt and red clay. Within a minute, the pounding of her steps and the schuhf-schihf of scattered leaves and dirt faded.

You can’t leave him. Never, never.

A shuffling, she looked up, expecting Davey— It
was worse.

Easily mistaken for a bear before it sat on its haunches, its six glass-green eyes gleamed right at her. A black, furry beast with guts pouring out of a smile-shaped, pus-weeping gouge on its belly. The guts poked around as if they were possessed, writhing like snakes. One meaty string tapered off into the bloodied head of a bird. The thing had fourteen antlers crowned atop its head, skins weaving between the points like spiderwebs.

The Thing-of-the-Woods.

And then came the swarm of lightning bugs, glistening like tears on Marcus’ cheek. She swatted at them, smashing her palm into his temple, the insect splattering across the side of her hand.

I killed him, and I’ll kill you too.

Her eyes and nose ran, and a roar shattered the sounds of shuddering wings and shaky breaths. More than anything, she wanted to reach for the fallen knife by her mud-shelled sneaker, but her arms were locked in place. Marcus was heavy in her arms, as if instead of flying away, his soul only grew thorny inside his body, cold, burrowing into her.

Hands numb yet shaking. Cold sweat trickling down her face. A dizzying weight on her swampy brain. Humming, buzzing in her ears.

If she flew too far again . . .

Her trance broke.

Shooting up and covering her bloodied hand with her sleeve, Rachel did what was only natural to her—a stupid, scared little thing—what every instinct, what her mind, what her heart, what every bone and muscle in her body told her to do.

You can't leave him.

She ran.

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4

GRABBING HER JACKET by the bird graves, Rachel put it on and continued running, hastily climbing down the mud-slicked, slanted earth. She crashed into the cabin door, crumpling to her feet, knees hitting concrete. It took all her strength not to scream, to weep on the flowery welcome rug.

She wasn't strong, and she couldn't keep this up. Her mind was too full and too empty, running so quickly she couldn't catch any of her swarming thoughts. In her hurry, she had forgotten that Marcus' stomach blood had blackened the front of her dress, and she hastily zipped up her jacket to hide it.

The door opened, revealing a purple, checkered skirt and lilac slippers.

"Rach, what on ear—child, what have you done to your dress?"

Rachel swallowed down bile and rubbed her temple. "Doors, right, those are things you open."

Brow furrowed, Linda extended a hand, and Rachel froze.

"What is it?" Linda asked.

Rachel shook her head. "I can't . . ."

Her stomach flipped, but, begrudgingly, she accepted Linda's hand. The pull drew her into the cabin, which was warmer and lighter than the darkening woods, but the air was still. It saw her. Meanwhile, the Thing-of-the-Woods was in the trees, the thing that fed off her doubts like a wolf sucking on marrow. It lurked at her back, its breaths dead and hot. Her knees throbbed, sending jolts down to her ankles.

"Is that clay?" Linda asked, and Rachel felt relieved. Still clutching her hand, Linda asked another question: "Are you bleeding?"

The relief vanished. Rachel snatched her hand away. “It’s just dirt.”

Linda’s brows drew close together. “You smell of blood.”

You should’ve known she’d catch that. She chewed her lip, tearing off a dry piece; it was nothing, just more flesh.

“I fell, scraped my knees real bad. You know me, thin skin.”

Linda opened her own hand, a smear of brown flecks on her palm where Rachel took her hand.

Rachel started, “God, I didn’t mean—”

“Oh hon, it’s not like I haven’t had blood on me before.” Exasperated, Linda took Rachel’s downturned fingers, squeezing harder. It was hard not to wince. “All right, you smell especially awful, what are you hiding?”

“I told you. I fell.”

“Some fall! Your knees must have no skin left. And that clay . . .” She was doing the tongue-against-her-teeth thing. “The two things that don’t wash out in Georgia.”

“Sorry, I’m sure it’ll be fine. I need to go.” She pulled away and made her way to the bedroom, the living room walls too red and glowering, the green rug a mocking, spiraling eye.

Linda followed, a breezy taptaptap. “I’ll clean you up.”

“It’s fine, really.”

“Didn’t we banish that word?”

“‘Really’?”

“‘Fine’.” In her lilting, ex-trauma surgeon voice, Linda said, reaching for Rachel’s shoulder. “Whatever it is needs to be disinfected, and— smells like a lot, Rach.”

Rachel lurched back, hitting the wall, trying to burrow in the long groove between the wood panels. She half-expected a hand to break through the wall. “A shallow cut! I cut myself on the briars. That’s all.” “What’s gotten into you? Are you hungry? You look like you’re about

to faint.”

God. “No, not really.”

“Then, what is it?”

Rachel shook her head. “Nothing. Sorry.”

The shrewd gleam in Linda’s eyes didn’t abate. Hovering, always hovering. In the past, Rachel appreciated it, craved it. “I really need to clean your—”

Rachel coiled deeper into herself. “No, this is *my* body, *my* choice.” It had been years since she last snapped at Linda, perhaps when she had had one of her bad days.

“I’m sorry. I know today is—a difficult—” Checking herself, Linda clapped her palms together and smiled a smile that didn’t reach her cheeks, much less her eyes. “You should wash up, though. And put some rubbing alcohol on your hands and knees—after the blood has dried, so it doesn’t bother you as much. I’d really hate for you to get sick with all this—stuff.”

Though Rachel would be inclined to agree a year ago, yesterday, hell, two hours ago, weariness precluded her need to bathe.

Linda’s meager smile disappeared altogether. “Did you see Marcus? He went out to check on you. We called, and you didn’t answer, and, well, you know how we get worried when you’re out for a few hours.”

Rachel dug her hands into her jacket pockets and looked to the wood floor. “Nope.”

Linda clicked her tongue, moving to the side to put on her outdoor shoes. “Hm, how very odd. It’s not like him to get lost. I suppose he could’ve met someone along the way.” Her voice lowered, and she shifted her head, as if that’d keep Rachel from hearing her next words.

“Or some filthy whore distracted him.” In any other circumstance, that carried the idea of Marcus being unfaithful, which would never happen. No, that wasn’t what she meant at all; in her eyes, all her victims were sluts and whores.

Like me?

No.

Whore. As she sat on the couch, Rachel imagined, for Linda, that word was retribution, reclamation, an inversion of power. According to the world away from their woods, demure, fair-skinned girls were the faces of virginity and purity. Never girls or women like Rachel or Linda.

“Don’t say that,” Rachel ground out.

Linda released the doorknob, flicking her wrist. “It’s a crude word, I know.”

“I was called that when . . .”

Linda clapped her hand over her mouth. “Honey, I’m sorry, I had no idea. Have I triggered you? What do you need from me?”

“It’s the anniversary.” Anniversary, such a benign word. Of course Linda knew that. It was all they talked about, and even when they didn’t, it swelled inside the cabin walls like frozen pipes, like a bruise.

I want to die. She had no idea how she’d survived that night. How she’d survive this night.

The dark edges of Linda’s face grew more pronounced. “I know, I *knew*, but I didn’t want to say anything. I can’t believe I’ve been so careless—for a moment, I worried about you being out all day because of . . . but it’s what you needed. What you need.” They let those words hang in the air. “Do you want to be alone?”

Rachel swallowed, picking at a hangnail with her teeth. *Yes. Yes, because I deserve it. Because you’ll kill me.* She folded her hands in her lap. They shook. “No.”

Linda held out a hand and only wrapped an arm around Rachel’s shoulders after she nodded her consent. Rachel allowed that warmth to envelop everything, allowed Linda to be her strength. Maybe she could have Linda stay forever and never discover Marcus. Maybe Marcus would stumble in, disoriented and with a heckuva migraine like the one swelling in the right side of Rachel’s brain, a rabbit burrowing its way from her heart to her throat to the gray membrane. He would have a concussion, and they would have a talk.

Her throat ached, and her right foot was numb.

“We can talk more,” Linda said, drawing away, “believe me, I’ll be here for you, but he really should be back by now.”

Rachel seized. “Don’t leave me alone.”

“I’m sorry. I know I asked if you needed me to—I’ll be here for you after I find Marcus. I don’t want you to go out in the dark, and I—you’ll be safer here, trust me. Do you think I’d let you stay here if it wasn’t safe?”

Rachel surged forward, bracing herself against Linda. Her ankles spasmed. “What if someone breaks in? Can’t we wait for him together?”

“I really must see if he’s okay, and besides, you need to bathe and put your clothes in the washer. And disinfectant, don’t forget.”

“I’m scared, please, I don’t want to be alone here.”

“Please, Rach, I won’t be gone for long. I promise. Wouldn’t you feel safer with all three of us here? And sweetie, you know where our weapons are.” The work room. The slaughter room. The hands in the walls. “You go out alone in the woods all the time. How is being alone here different, if not safer?”

I killed him. I killed him for someone I hardly knew.

But she’s innocent, isn’t she? Does she deserve to die? If Davey deserved to die, who would be the judge and jury when all they had were executioners?

What did it make Rachel that she accepted death for this long? “The—I was in a cabin when—you know, you were there.”

Linda’s eyes flashed, warm with compassion and cold with something else. “I would never leave you here if I thought someone could break in and do—that. Never. You trust me, don’t you?”

“You can’t promise something won’t happen.”

“I understand, really, I do.”

“I, I know.” *And when you find out what I’ve done?* Rachel tugged on Linda’s sleeve. “But Mom, please.”

Expression a knot of dark lines, Linda reached forward and swept Rachel into her arms. The smell of strawberries comforted her, if only until she realized what was about to happen. She returned the hug because it might as well have been the last.

When Linda pulled away, she offered an apologetic smile and patted Rachel’s cheek. “I’ll try to be home in an hour or less, before it gets completely dark. All right?”

Throat thick like it’d been stuffed with wool, Rachel nodded.

When the door closed, she waited a minute. One, two . . .

Fifty-eight, fifty-nine . . .

Rachel fell on the rug and screamed. The rough fabric scraped her palms.

It was useless to pine over what she lost and how she'd do anything to restart the day, but she did it anyway. Wondered if she chose the other option, if she let Marcus kill Davey, if it would've haunted her. Would she have been any different from the man who broke in and murdered Mama and Papa? What made her current parents different than that man, anyhow?

Everyone my parents have killed or wanted to kill is evil.

Except Davey.

In the most extreme circumstances, anyone can murder for survival, to protect themselves and those they love, Linda had told her once.

Rachel couldn't love Davey yet, could she? But did she need to love someone to save them?

You helped them find someone to kill.

Homie waddled over, sniffing her hand.

My name is Rachel, and it's not my fault. That was what Marcus would have her say, whispered into the grooves of the well-worn floor like a thousand bleeding steps.

If this isn't your fault, then who the hell is at fault?

Heat drained from her face when she realized Linda could stumble upon not only Marcus' body, but Davey; she didn't know if Linda could kill someone and drag their body alone, but if she even just killed Davey in a fit of rage and grief, this would all be for nothing. She froze at the thought of going to her bedroom and seeing the afghan Marcus made for her—well, halfway through its creation, it was for her. It mattered, all the same.

She wanted to blame Davey for this, for ruining everything.

Maybe start with Linda. Marcus. Yourself.

Her mind drifted to four years ago, a week before her fourteenth birthday.

What am I doing? How did it come to this?

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5

MIKE TUGGED ON her hair, and Rachel grinned, stopping short of kissing him again. “Get on your knees, whore.”

What am I doing? she thought, laughing and dropping to her knees. Music buzzed in her, stirred her to a steady ecstasy. She tasted as many of the boys as she could, though her jaw started to ache. She looked up at Mike, admiring his red hair and green eyes.

They had been cheeky, cheeky and smart, stealing a car, so they could party in the mountains with no one supervising. Boy, they’d be in trouble later, but it didn’t matter. She’d never felt more accepted, as free as she did tonight during this special New Year’s Eve celebration.

She could tell the moment the air soured when a grip hardened in her hair and tugged. When she cried out, and only laughter answered her, laughter and teeth on her lips and neck. Someone slapped her. Blood swelled in her mouth as she fell on the mattress, cocaine and pine straw scattering, half-empty bottles rolling off. Someone ripped her dress, pulled it over her head, and they tore her cotton tights. Knuckles raked across her cheek.

“Don’t move much, and it won’t hurt.”
“Just relax.”

Rachel said, or thought she said, “No, I don’t . . .” Her eyes stung. The voices started to mix. She couldn’t tell the order of the talking, nor whether Mike, Tom, or Jake all spoke. Or if it was in her head.

“You’re just nervous.”

“Everyone’s nervous the first time.”

A hand on her cheek. “You’re so pretty for a Mexican.” What happiness remained fizzled out.

“I’m . . . I’m not Mexican.” Her mother had been Cuban, Afro-Cuban American. “Get off me.” She kicked, but a crushing weight froze her legs, and hands clutched her wrists.

It happened, and she was bruised and exposed. The boys (God, they were just boys, and she had once seen them as so mature) went into a stupor, lounging around and dozing face-first on the floor.

The strangest part of the rape was that, immediately, her pain was mostly physical, not emotional. As if her mind was clouding over to protect her, prepared her for accepting that this had happened, that she’d be blamed for it, and that she’d ride home with these boys—her white foster brothers—and pretend this never happened. There would be comments, snickers, and stray touches, as there always were. If anyone else found out, she’d be the one tormented and broken down. It didn’t matter if she wasn’t okay, needed help.

Boys will be boys, especially the teenage ones, what do you expect? the social worker would say while adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose. Always horny and inappropriate. They’ll grow out of it. Just don’t encourage them. If you don’t act as if it bothers you, they’ll be less inclined to goad you.

Rachel couldn’t be a troublemaker; it’d already cost her two homes, her pendulum mood swings from screaming because of night terrors to introversion and flinching at every touch. All she ever wanted was either all the touching in the world or for no one to look at her. Everything and nothing all at once. No wonder she was always alone, defective. Life lit her on fire and others blamed her for stoking the flames.

Buzzing. Lightning bugs glittered around her. Her first thoughts that were in her own voice and not the others, trickled in:

No one will want me if I’m even more broken.

They’ll send me back, as always.

This is all I’m good for to them.

It’s over.

Through it all, Mama said, Oh, my love, my heart, this will heal.

The rest came from her colder half, logically piecing together her next few days of survival like a map of puzzle pieces: You need to get dressed and laugh it off. Nobody will want you otherwise.

When she tried to move, to lift herself off the dirty mattress, she couldn't. The cold of the floor seeped through the mattress. Her spine was liquid pain, and the bites on her neck and chest stung more than she thought they would. At first, they were numbing; now, they were hornets. The crackling in her mind became music. It wasn't lightning bugs after all. The stars stuttered around her, jerking to the left and right at sharp angles. More music, actual music. The heavy brr brr of the speakers rattled her bones.

No, she narrowed her eyes, they were definitely lightning bugs floating everywhere, and she wished they'd lift her out of here. Grow teeth. Kill her, eat her.

Through it all, someone was snoring. She heard movement, the sound of cursing and glass shattering, jeering at whoever tripped on the bottle.

A door opened. Above her, the bugs came together like waves washing into sand.

Heaven. She must be dying. Good thing she was looking up like Mama said—what would Mama and Papa think if they saw her now, bleeding? She couldn't see the blood. Heat churned in her stomach, and it was the only warmth she had as she froze. The space between her legs throbbed. She imagined her guts spilling out.

Screams.

She looked to her left, and Mike was staring down at her, but not with a sneer or that cold glint in his eyes. Those eyes were wide, his mouth moving without sound. His hands swung up and down; he was telling her to get up, but he didn't bother to reach down and help her. The room had gotten darker, and his eyes bulged, veins reddening his eyes and making the toxic green greener.

A whiteness, a sliver of moon, poked through Mike's neck.

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6

RACHEL FAINTED.

The moon, the knife—she hoped it was God cleansing everything, cleansing her with His fire. That was all God was good for now.

Even then, when she heard the screams cut short, she grieved her brothers, for Mike and that hair she admired in quiet shame. They were lost to her in a way worse and quieter than grief; she couldn't cherish what memories she had, since they were tainted.

We were friends. They weren't always like this. Excuses, the way back to normal. She'd excuse why it happened and move on because that was what a strong person was told to do. Blame herself because she could control that. Never get slapped again for crying too much. Everything was supposed to be better in the past, so she would make the past as clean as possible as she went along.

I thought he—they liked me.

Not feeling was better. When she came back to herself for less than five seconds, someone was carrying her, and even in the cold, she wasn't exposed to the elements. Someone had thought to wrap her up. A shroud, a funeral blanket, whatever they were called, a pail, like the bucket, a paul, a pall. As if that'd keep the wolves away. They were going to bury her. She faded into herself again.

When she came to for real, she was warm. Cushions, scratchy ones, her palm in the crease where two met. When she opened her eyes, her head split open as she first saw the searing ceiling light with fan blades swirling around like a whirlpool. A sky pool. Around her was a red blanket that hurt her eyes more, but when she looked up at the white, rain-stained ceiling again, she realized that, no, those were just her eyes aching.

“How are you feeling?” a voice said.

Mama?

Rachel’s attention snapped toward the source, a woman sitting in a chair with a wary smile on her face. Linda, looking the same in that unusual introduction as she did now. At first, Rachel mistook her for Mama. She had that same curly, black hair, but her features were longer, and the slightest creases under her dark eyes belied some age, which Mama had never been allowed to have. Rachel should’ve asked a hundred questions typical when you first meet a stranger, such as *Who are you?* or *Where am I?* or *Were you the one who killed everybody?*

Instead, Rachel muttered, “My head hurts.” It’d be simpler to say what didn’t hurt.

Marcus came in, saying nothing and standing beside Linda. Same faint smell of washed flannel and roses. Always flannel. He’d been so closed off to her then, eyes absent of that light they had when he tutored her in literature and explained Shakespeare puns. While Rachel sat up on the couch, wearing only a blanket and too conscious of his eyes, Marcus stared to the left of her head, and she replied by puking on his shoes. It tasted acrid, and Linda did her best to keep her hair on her neck, rather than falling in her face. When Rachel was done, Linda released her hair without touching her skin. Rather than freaking out over it like Rachel’s foster parents would, nobody said anything at first.

“M’sorry,” Rachel stated once she was through. *Jesus, don’t apologize to them.* She had to if she wanted them to like her. It was weird that she was concerned about some strangers liking her, but she’d been taught smiling and apologizing was her civic duty as many times as she’d been told to pull her skirts down by old white women with Coke-bottle glasses and pinched lips.

Linda waved it off. “We can clean it. The rug, anyway. I’m sure his shoes will be fine.”

Marcus, less amused, scuffed off the vomit with the sole of each shoe. “Does she have a fever? She’s sweating.” Rachel didn’t like that he was noticing things about her. Her mouth tightened, and she slid closer to the back of the couch. He had no right to look at her.

“I checked before she awoke,” Linda replied, “and I definitely think we should give her a fever reducer along with a painkiller.”

They were talking like she wasn’t there. Talking with precision, and it hit her in full force as her grogginess lessened.

She had heard them enter the cabin, that was it. Had heard the screams, had seen . . .

“You killed them.”

Linda’s face scrunched, though even then, she looked pretty, undeterred. “We . . .” No denial, shock, anger.

Rachel stared at her bruised, swollen wrists before bolting off the couch with the blanket tight around her, too aware of her vulnerability. She was close to what she hoped was the front door. “Oh my God. You killed them. You *killed* them!” She emphasized every word, but they didn’t sound real to her. Her voice was different, turned inside-out like the rest of her.

An exit—windows, no, the front door. She was there, hand on the cold knob. If she left, she—

She had nowhere to go. Through the window, she only saw as far as the yellow exterior lights went, could hardly make out the ghosts of trees because they all formed one shadowy curtain past the hanging cloud of frost.

Linda stood, but didn’t advance. Even then, every move was careful. Calculated. “We saved you.”

What did this lady want, a well-at-least-we-spared-you medal? Rachel felt foolish, tumbling about the room with her aching, naked everything.

It was—she should’ve been more scared. Now, she was tired. She had gone through the worst thing she could. The thing that made teachers tell her to keep her knees close and pull her skirt over them. Dying after this would be a mercy. Why didn’t they just kill her when she was on that stained mattress?

She needed to leave, but where could she go? The space between her legs throbbed, as did her chest and neck. No matter how much she tried to hide her pain, her entire body fought back. How far could she run when she could barely stand without feeling like she was being stabbed?

“We aren’t going to hurt you.” Linda said, holding her hands out. “Do you have any guardians?” The man said nothing, standing so still she wasn’t sure if he was breathing. Maybe he had died, or maybe he was a ghost, or maybe she was in another world, that world that crept in sometimes when she was awake but living in shadows.

Rachel should say yes, and that they’d be coming for her immediately. A lie, clearly, but enough to make them think she’d cause them trouble if they kept her here.

Maybe that’d provoke Linda. She’d just met this person. This killer. She couldn’t just spill out her entire life story, the truth; she never did anyway because she’d be called a whiner, ungrateful.

“I’m alone.” *My parents died,* she wanted to say, but she swallowed it.

Linda tucked in her bottom lip. A gleam in her eyes, a flash. Something like relief. “I’m so sorry, child. I know how that is. I haven’t seen my mother in—I don’t know how long.”

No, she didn’t understand. She had someone here. Rachel hadn’t lived alone, but she’d been alone.

Linda’s voice was soft, and it took Rachel aback. Up till now, she was prepared if Linda hurt her, as if she could be more wounded. Linda’s eyes reminded her of Mama’s on Christmas Eve when the ornaments, which reflected the fireplace light, made Mama’s eyes shine in that dreamy, thoughtful way.

Linda said, “We could be your parents.” Behind her, Marcus’ eyes widened. He turned his head, mouth twitching, and when he straightened again, he was blank again.

Rachel’s teeth set. “You are literally killers. How many people have you killed, again? At least three?” That’d make them serial killers, or so she read, which was worse than plain ol’ killers. More importantly, she didn’t need parents. That didn’t mean she didn’t want any, but it was pretty much time to give up on family. As morbid as it felt to joke about it, now was a pretty good time to give up on old dreams and happiness, especially family, especially when it was your family who hurt you.

“Killers, yes, but only of those who hurt innocents, like you.”

Rachel laughed darkly. “I’m not innocent.” *If you knew I’d been sucking their cocks before they hurt me, would you have just killed me?* She hated that word, “cocks.” It always sounded gross when her foster brothers said it. *Cocksucker.* It was ugly, so was she. *Would you have killed me if you arrived ten minutes early?* They would’ve. They were like everyone else ready to use her and throw her away. Big surprise.

Linda replied, as if she was a mind reader, “Nothing you’ve done could justify what they did to you.”

“My head hurts,” Rachel mumbled again, running a hand over her face, feeling the vomit and spit along her mouth and chin. Her vision focused, and she examined the room.

Too much.

Too many details to take in. Her eyes were either too blurry or too sharp, telling her too little or too much. Red carpet, green puke-stained rug, framed mountain art, a dust-layered, big-buttoned television hunched behind Linda with some of those buttons missing, reminding Rachel of street cats she saw with missing eyes and burned-off tails. The cats she’d always wanted to bring home, but Mama would say with a sad sigh, “You can’t save them all.”

That Rachel died a long time ago; she’d given up on saving anyone. Linda said, “All right, we’ll get you something for that, if that’s all right.” She nodded to Marcus.

He left the room, and she heard him shuffling through a cabinet somewhere in the dimness of the home. Awkwardly, Rachel sidewinded back to the couch, perched on the edge. When he returned with a balled fist, he had on two well-worn moccasins, puke-free.

Without a word, he offered her two white pills, and Rachel promptly flung herself to the farthest part of the couch, holding her hands in front of her face. “Don’t. Please.” No more, no more. If he touched her—this woman wouldn’t let him touch her, would she?

Linda worried her hands in her dress and cleared her throat. Marcus looked to her, and she opened a palm. He dropped the pills in her hand, and she leaned close to Rachel, who bristled.

Voice like syrup, Linda said, “These are to help with your head, and they won’t upset your stomach, I promise.”

Rachel eyed her, and then the pills. No way. She had no way of knowing these pills were what this stranger said they were. They could be—and she could—

The rabbit lost in her heart grew and squirmed, climbing her ribs like a ladder and making her cough, its little claws pressing against the tight, convex smoothness of her skull.

Convex, she thought with a mental laugh. Mama had taught her that one.

"How did you know what was happening to me?" Rachel asked. Linda's forehead creased. "The music was so loud. That was why we went in."

"To kill some punk kids for their music?" No answer. "What is your name?"

What does that have to do with anything, and why do you care? "Rachel."

Linda's smile was too wide for her liking; it was a social worker smile. "That's a very pretty name."

Rachel scoffed. Out of all the things to compliment her on, her name was the literal worst option. "So? I didn't come up with it." If she snapped back, maybe they'd put her out of her misery. She fought between saving herself and plunging on the knife.

Marcus made a sound like a laugh, but it was curt. He shouldn't be here. Rachel didn't care if this was his home.

Linda said, "While we're introducing ourselves, my name is Linda, and my husband's name is Marcus. That's him." She pointed. He did nothing but offer a ghost of a nod. He was like Rachel during first-day class introductions.

Great. Fine and dandy. "Are you not going to let me go?" Rachel said. "Am I supposed to stay here forever?"

Linda stared. "You can go if you wish. I'd advise you wait till morning, once it warms up, and you can see. But if you stay, we can take care of you." The woman leaned in, and Rachel jumped, so Linda, to her credit, put distance between them. "We have an examination room. We were both trauma surgeons, you see, and we can inspect for infection and damage."

"How?"

“‘How’?” Linda put on a school counselor voice, Rachel’s least favorite type of voice because it was the fakest one she knew.

“How would you ‘inspect’ me?” Acid burned her stomach and surged up her throat.

“We’d use a speculum, a device to open—you can imagine where. To make sure . . . there’s all kinds of diseases, you see.”

Rachel could imagine *where,* and while Linda not spitting it out in front of her made Rachel’s nostrils flare, *that* hurting part of Rachel spasmed when she imagined the examination. Her hand caged the side of her head, trying to make the blood go back to her head, focusing on the comforting dark of her hands.

“No. Nonono,” Rachel whispered. “I don’t need to even look—it’s damaged, okay? But it’ll be fine.”

Linda looked at her with an expression she couldn’t read. “What do you want us to do for you?”

“‘Want’?” No one asked that. It sounded like Linda was up to something, and, like everything else, Rachel didn’t have a real choice. She could stay inside or go out and freeze to death.

“What can I—we do to help you through this?” It took her long enough to ask.

“I don’t know.” Hours ago, she wanted adventure. Acceptance. Love. She thought her one time to get it was going along with guys around her age and acting like they wanted. She hated how that should make her cry, but inside she laughed at the hurting absurdity of everything.

I want to die. Marcus wouldn’t stop looking in her direction. The blanket smelled of mothballs, and by God she wanted to burn it, wanted him to go away forever and claim this space as her own.

Rachel said lowly, “Make him stop looking at me.” He wasn’t even looking fully at her, but her skin crawled.

Linda glanced at Marcus, and he turned his head to the side. When Linda looked back at her, her eyes were dark, soft, and earnest. As bad as it hurt to admit it after what she went through, a little budding part of Rachel trusted her, but shadows crawled all over that trust, picking at it and swallowing the leaves one-by-one.

“Did you really kill them all?” Rachel squeaked. “Every single one?”
“To defend you, yes,” Linda said. “To avenge you.”

Avenge her. As if there was anything left to avenge. She hadn’t asked for that. Killing them couldn’t reverse what they’d done, wasn’t what comforted her right now, which was nothing. “Avenge” sounded like she was supposed to feel some kinda triumph and closure after it was all said and done. Nope. It was like them killing someone for cutting out her heart; no matter how much blood was on anyone’s hands, no one could retrieve her heart and have it beat to the same tune.

“Why?” *Why me?* The police will look for her and the others, won’t they? The car they stole. *Our foster parents. If not me, my brothers for sure.* Her parents might not care for her except to show her off at church to prove their charity, but her brothers were white as bread. They’d look for them. But how would anyone know where they went? They’d just planned on getting high in the woods before they stumbled upon an abandoned cabin to ward off the growing cold.

“Because I see . . .” Linda pursed her lips. “I’m not sure what the words for it are.” She cleared her throat. “Are you—how does one do this? Are you hungry?”

Rachel shivered. “I want a bath.”

“We have one, a tub, that is, and we have a bed—one we haven’t used. It’s dusty and has boxes on it, but we can move them to the storage building, can’t we, Marcus?”

Marcus replied with his gaze on the wall. “I need to speak with you.” He ambled off. Good riddance.

Linda extended a flattened hand, which still held the pills. “Will you take these? Do you feel hot?”

“Put them on the table, and we’ll see.” There was a small table with a lamp by the couch. Nodding, Linda set them there. After a pause, Rachel frowned and grabbed Linda’s wrist, pressing it on her forehead for two seconds. Only two seconds, and she shoved it away with more force than she meant.

“You’re burning. You should try to take a cold bath.”

“I was planning to.”

Linda paused, her next words measured. “I’ll put a nightgown out for you, on the table outside of the bathroom.”

“Why?” asked Rachel. “Why’re you really helping me?”

“Because I want to see you heal.”

Again. “Why? Just so I can pretend to be something I’m not, something you want? Did you see what they did? I don’t have the goddamn time to be anything besides. . .” Besides Broken. Besides The Troublemaker, the Odd One, the Reject. The Bitch. The Whore.

“No. I—I need to speak to my husband, dear, but you can—do as you wish. Anything of ours is yours, every room, except the work room.”

“I can’t go in there, not ever?” God, she was already talking like this place was her home. Girls like her weren’t allowed homes. To adults, they were burdens that got traded in like crappy old TVs.

“Unless you need a medical exam, I see no reason why you’d need to. It’s terribly dreary. Dark.”

“A medical room, dark?”

Linda replied, “Let me check on my husband, d—”

“My name is . . .” She had already said her name, or did she? Should she have? Did she care if she should have? “Rachel. Not Dear.”

“Right, Rachel,” Linda said with a faltering smile, backing up and going into another room.

Rachel stared at the front door. The wind beat on the windows, swinging the shutters against the glass and making her jump. Like the outside was beckoning to her. And she could try . . .

She could try to run.

Into the dark nothing.

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7

DESPITE HER PAIN, she could try to run till her feet gave out. ’Cause it wasn’t like she wasn’t used to pain. Or darkness. Especially at night. For a city full of art, light, music, and good food, Atlanta had pockets of dark, ghostly silence.

A stabbing pain crackled down her legs as she stood off the couch, swallowing her gasps. She’d been hurt before. Wait a day, a week, a month, when she healed, and then she’d go . . .

Go where? *You have no one. You dumb bitch*. This wasn’t like before.

Her thoughts, the voices, some loud, some hissed whispers. She never knew whether the persistent talking in her head was her own invention, or if they just *were*. She was told in school that ill people didn’t know they were ill, that what was imagined was indeterminate from what was real. That sounded more than a little insulting, something that meant she’d never fully own who she was. But people dismissed her without knowing some parts of her, so she didn’t know what to believe, who to speak to about this.

You’re alone, again. Those words rolled over the windows like black ice on pavement. She eyed the pills on the table. No way she was taking them.

A different kind of darkness pulsed on the windows, different than the strange silence of Atlanta, a busy city that went from honking, shouting, SUVs guzzling and choking on their own fumes, to deathly quiet, the city afraid of provoking its old ghosts that crawled along the abandoned train tracks and cannonball-pocked walls.

Leaning on her toes, Rachel crept into the cramped hall, to the ajar door Linda disappeared behind. She saw little. Marcus’ knees, elbows, his chin

between his hands, which settled over both halves of his face.

He stood as Linda began to pace, and Rachel shrank back, so she wouldn't be seen.

"Linda," he started in that tired way of someone restarting an old argument.

Linda said, shaking her arms out as they trembled with excitement, "She has no one, Marcus. Do you know what this means?"

Rachel had never heard someone so thrilled she was alone. He

frowned, deeper than it'd already been. "I can imagine."

Eyes glittering, Linda murmured, "She has a headache and a fever, among other things." Which didn't seem relevant, but again, she was talking to herself—loudly. "But we can take care of her and help her recover with our expertise and—shared experiences."

"That girl probably has a hangover," Marcus said. "Did you see those bottles on the floor—all over? Did you see her eyes? She's inebriated. Drunk. No wonder she has a headache, and no wonder she passed out." What an asshole. Teeth grinding together, Rachel bristled and wasn't sure if she wanted to yell or cry. More than anything, she wanted to stomp in and say, oh yeah, she was abused in a way that made standing like crossing a rotted bridge over a black pit. Endless cramps and shaking. Yet all he cared about was that she was drinking. While that alcohol still stained her tongue, would probably remain no matter how hard she scrubbed it away. She passed out from pain, not because of the beer.

This douchenoodle. Like she needed help hating herself for what happened. Like she needed someone to tell her she made mistakes.

Facing Marcus, Linda's mouth drew close to her nose, the lines beneath her eyes darkening. Her eyes sharpened into daggers, and Rachel feared she'd witness another murder.

"Marcus," Linda said, prickly as a thorn. It startled Rachel, the glimpse of Linda's harsher side after her flightiness, and Marcus leaned back. Oof. Rachel couldn't really enjoy things now, but she came close to enjoying that look on his big nerdy face. "Look at me." When he acquiesced, she continued, voice rising, "This poor girl was raped, possibly multiple times. You saw the blood on the mattress. And you only care about her *drinking*? You think that's the most pressing issue?" She marched over to him till they

were not even a mouse hair's length apart. Eyes narrowed, she said, "Do you remember what you said to me, what was it, eight years ago?"

Linda was . . . defending Rachel. Nobody did that since Mama and Papa died.

Startled, Marcus replied, "Yes, I never meant . . ."

Rigid and unmoving, Linda set her mouth into a severe line. "How dare you?"

The side of his mouth twitched downward. Just when Rachel believed he couldn't frown more, he proved her wrong. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to imply—of course what happened wasn't her fault, whether she was inebriated or not."

Linda stepped away and messed with the angel figurine on her nightstand. With the lamp on, a golden glow washed across their bedroom. The wallpaper had moose and bears, and the lamp's base was in the shape of a tree.

"Linda, she's too much of a risk," Linda's stupid husband said.

"No!" Linda crossed her arms, nose flaring. "We can't just kill her." Oh good, now Rachel was relieved.

"I wasn't suggesting that."

"Then what? Did you see what they did to her? The look in her eyes? She's not like the other ones." Had they taken in others or did they mean girls—people—her age, in general?

Potential children.

Victims.

They're your heroes. Saviors. Don't be so . . .

Ungrateful. Because she was always ungrateful, or worse, angry. Always told she had an "attitude" when she spoke up. She never smiled enough, and she allegedly had a pretty smile.

"Don't say that," he replied, voice hard. "She's no different. Of course she isn't! Young, just like them—coming in and—"

And, and what? Ruining everything like her brothers had ruined her?

"Too young!" Linda said breathlessly. "Not even—still just a baby."

Part of Rachel resented that, and another part . . . it had been so long since she had been called a child in a way that wasn't telling her what she said couldn't be trusted, or that she was immature for her age because of how much she cried after Mama and Papa's deaths. Because crying wasn't what normal kids did in school, and after a year, she should've moved on.

As the social worker had said, she was lucky to have her parents die early instead of later, since kids bounced back faster than adults. So really, why was she wasting time sulking while her parents were in Heaven?

"No, she isn't," Marcus said, dragging Rachel out of her thoughts. "This—it'll only lead to more complications. We came here to find peace. Solitude. What makes her any different than those others, besides appearing younger? Besides . . ."

Lips pursed, Linda lowered her head, pivoting so that her profile was to him, her back to Rachel. "She's so . . ."

What am I, besides a nuisance?

With a shaky breath, Linda wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. *God, don't cry. If you get tired of me now, I'm already dead.* "Her name is Rachel."

Marcus' expression softened in quiet horror. "God, Linda. Please don't cry." He closed the space between them and touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry." Linda faced him, resting against him while he hugged her. They leaned into each other, as if burdened with years of grief.

Feeling intrusive and cold, Rachel backed away from the door and limped around, perusing all the identical, red-brown doors in the hall. When she turned around, past the master bedroom was a door with a chain and lock around it, and a compulsion told her to go near it, but her ankles hardened to stone. After a minute, she stepped forward, foot in front of the master bedroom door.

A weary sigh from inside their room. She jerked away, covering her mouth and waiting to be caught. When nothing happened, she went to a room she found out was another bedroom. It was adequate, a good CRCT word. Adda-quit. Like graduate. Solid.

The room had a weird funk. Dust and mildew. Long, off-white curtains that might've once been on-white. Three or four boxes stacked on a

modestly sized bed with linens and a dark quilt. Next, she went to the bathroom, and when she turned the light on, she jumped her how bright it was, as if she hadn't seen such strong light in a hundred years.

Such whiteness.

Shuddering, she ducked her head when she saw her phantom profile in the bathroom mirror. The room had a tub built into the opposite wall, a toilet beside it, and a sink. A porcelain angel sat on the toilet, its mocking, grotesque smile an infected pink cutting into its ghost-white cheeks, its hair a colony of yellow snakes curling like seashells, its flowing gown the green-blue of pretty mold. Reaching for it, she saw the purple-black on her wrists, and vomit rose in her throat again.

She froze, waiting for the angel to reach out and bite her, bless her with death. If she stood here all night, how long would it take till the angel split her hand in half with its needly, yellow teeth and melted her skin with its green eyes?

Her fingers inched closer to the angel. Closing her eyes, she went to turn it so its wings would be to her, but—

Thunk. Her eyes shot open, and there the angel rested on the white tiles, its left wing shattered and half its face scattering at her feet.

You idiot.

Shitshitshit. She looked to the door, waiting for someone to barge in.

Everyone must've heard that. Linda, what's-his-face, God.

They'd kill her, all three of them.

She waited.

Nothing. Too busy hugging, she guessed.

A knock on the door. "Are you okay?" Linda asked.

Rachel wanted to snipe that of course she wasn't okay, not even a little. "Yeah, fine, just taking a bath."

"I heard—"

"Can I have some privacy, please?" Linda hadn't opened the door, but it felt like she was looking.

Quiet.

Rachel stepped close to the bath, bowing down to support herself on the closed toilet lid, only for the angels' cheek to slice into the ball of her feet. Not even wincing, she dropped the blanket, settling her feet over it and covering up the evidence of her little triumph.

She intended to take a shower because if she sat, she wouldn't be able to get up. Once the water pelted her, she crumpled like rocks had plunked down on her head. Her neck was angled painfully against the tub rim. The more she worked to move, the more her bones became iron feathers twisting and melting into her skin. What had only stirred a little after what she endured reared its fanged head. It started when the shower water pattered the tub, and when it hit between her legs and spilled down, red crept in the water and crawled toward the drain.

When Mama and Papa died, she wasn't even twice the age of when she was in religious pre-school and the teacher made them take red crayons and color wounds on a portrait of Jesus, only to plaster band aids on him. Jesus, whom she ate every Sunday. Whereas other students practically disemboweled Christ right on the cross, she managed the smallest scratch on his calf, kissing the band aid as she applied it, just as she did when she applied Mama's bandages on her dolls and stuffed dog. She hated the red, and the other kids mocked her for being such a baby.

Touching her hair, she felt something tangled in it, and it broke apart in her hands when she pulled it out to examine it. A leaf. Right, it had gotten in her hair before she and her brothers went into the cabin. It was from her life before.

The red kept coming.

Her friends had raped her.

Her friends. Brothers. Rapists.

They were dead.

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8

DEAD. BECAUSE OF her.

Good. They deserved it, worse. And she hated herself.

If she hadn’t been such a slut, everyone’d say, they wouldn’t have raped her. If they didn’t rape her, she wouldn’t’ve needed these avenging angels.

If she didn’t have these—people . . .

Because of what happened (all her fault, she never should’ve—should’ve stayed in her room), she had only these murderers to count on. She couldn’t even apologize. All she wanted was to be forgotten, slip down the drain.

Her mouth tasted of vomit, acrid and hot, and she swallowed it down. She pressed the back of her head harder against the hard surface, hoping to crack her skull if she slammed her head against it, painted the white with her red. Like it should. She had been stained and no one cared. No one who mattered.

Who mattered. Who did matter? Not her.

Her eyes bore into the ceiling, stucco full of smirks and wings, the sound of rain hitting the roof—a tin roof?—drowning out any other thoughts for a minute and, sadly, not longer than that.

No choices. She had nothing. She could die any second; almost comforting. From what she saw, the entire house (cabin?) only had one story, so there was nowhere to run except outside, as if she could find her way through the woods at night. Maybe it’d be quick, maybe she’d bleed out. More than anything, she needed to run once she healed (if she healed),

but even with everything, she was treated better here than in Atlanta, as if it couldn't get sadder. Sadder, no, more pathetic.

As if *she* couldn't be any more backwards. The only people fit to give her kindness were sick and depraved. If they weren't like everyone else and preparing to toss her out.

Sick, they were sick. Like her.

A different kind of sick. Rachel was sick like someone who caught the flu; she had had this done to her, put inside her. These people—she didn't know what they went through, but people didn't just have a bad day and decide murder was okay. Or maybe they did. What, would she argue—like people whispered about her—that these people were inherently bad? Would she say the same if they had blue eyes?

They were gentle, gentler than people who'd known Rachel for years. At least, the woman—Linda was. Gentle. A killer. How did that work?

As a dog barked outside, she watched the red circle the drain, and the curve of the blood, once it wasn't just a pink blur, was like an uncaring, swirling cat smile. Even the water laughed at her.

She'd underestimated how much blood there'd be.

Maybe she should've let the woman inspect her; she sure as hell felt like someone took a bag of needles and dumped it below her belly button. Pain, she'd expected. What she didn't expect was the smell 'cause, for fuck's sake, she was cleaning herself, but she still smelled the blood, yeah, but also the alcohol, pot, sweat mixed with—she couldn't even name it, a musk not running down the drain, all of it still there and and and—

From the tub, she stretched over the rim, retching in the toilet, leaving puke on the rim.

How could they do this to her? She had made faces at them, had laughed and cried with them. For the first time, she had a family, but the looks the boys gave her, they were different than expected, the touches too lingering. Tom gave her pretty rocks, and Mike gave her origami birds. All the same, they saw the cracks in her, the openings, and they took all they could—

She hadn't gotten the nightgown. They'd seen everything already, hadn't they? A cool, bleak acceptance numbed her disgust, the throbbing behind her right eye. Her mouth was swollen, like it'd been stuffed with wool. She

thought, how funny, how really funny she should cocoon into herself forever and a week, but she was still moving despite her body screaming.

She had stood when she thought the space between her thighs would split farther, going up her belly, spreading to her neck. She already had trouble swallowing, so maybe that was happening, but on the deep, deep inside.

When she stepped out of the tub, she thought she would die. It was like when they dissected frogs in class—that chemical smell flooded her nose, became a taste in her mouth—she coughed. It was like what they used to keep the flaps of the frog's stomach, swollen with eggs, open. That metal knife-scissor-clamp thing was holding her open, letting her spill out. If bodies could reject transplanted organs, would reject foreign objects, her body was rejecting itself.

With the washcloths on the sink, tiptoeing around the broken porcelain, she tried to scrub away the pinkish tint in the tub, the barf on the toilet, and when she looked down at her legs, it was like the first day she started her period—what, a month ago? She then scrubbed herself, ignoring the stinging in her foot. On a rack by the toilet, she grabbed a fluffy and pink towel, wrapping it around her, which was a thing she'd done a million times before.

Rachel stepped out of the bathroom, shutting off the light, hair falling in her face.

She jumped when she saw Linda standing there, smiling.

"You're out," Linda said.

Rachel didn't want to talk, wasn't sure if she even wanted to sleep. "Am I?"

If Linda suspected she'd been snooping around before, she said nothing. There was something in Linda's hand, a white floral nightgown that looked awful comfy and—Rachel flushed—a pair of panties. Linda extended it to Rachel, who only stared, pressing her towel closer to herself, hoping it'd meld to her skin.

"Yes, well, if you want," Linda said, as if replying to something Rachel said, "this is all I could think would be appropriate, till you have new clothes."

Rachel imagined her own eyes, large and round, almost looking completely pupil-black. “I never said I’d stay.”

“You didn’t, but—you never said otherwise, and I would feel remiss if I dropped you off somewhere. You need to rest, and I am—I know how to take care of you, physically and mentally.”

If I dropped you off somewhere. Like the police. Cops were the last people Rachel would ever want to speak to, even the guards who patrolled the school packing heat, hand at their hip, an inch from a bullet that could kill her or a taser that could stop her heart. It was like being put with the wolves in the zoo and watching them stalk around, leering.

And physically and mentally—a lost cause. And there was no way Rachel would let anyone get physical with her, even in the medical sense. No one would—no, no, no, *no*.

They stared at each other.

Linda kept her face carefully blank, and Rachel tried to find hints of irritation. Or murder.

“Oh, I want to show you something, where I keep—you know, the sorts of things you need.” A pause. “You . . . have had a period, haven’t you? Do you know what that is?”

This lady really thought she was dumb. So did everyone. “Yeah?”

“Ah, good.” Not the word Rachel would use. “You’re about the age—how old are you?”

“Thirteen.” About to be fourteen, but Linda didn’t need to know that. If she figured out Rachel was any older, she might lose sympathy. Girls had expiration dates, after all.

Once that word hit the air, Linda’s face fell, but only for a second. She maybe was thinking, wow, that’s so young to be raped, as if there was an age a girl hit when, sure, rape was bad, but it wasn’t like *that* bad.

About the period stuff, Linda said, “I haven’t needed them, pads, in years, but I still packed them, kept them around, just in case. We’ll probably need to buy more.”

Stepping forward, Linda handed Rachel the nightgown. Instinctively, Rachel slid away from the bathroom door, and Linda. The woman, still with no hair out of place, hands clasped like a religious preschool nun—

“Don’t go in there,” Rachel blurted, struggling to keep her towel up and clasp the nightgown. Her wet hair fell in her face, curling.

Linda arched a brow, as adults did. “Why?”

“I messed up. I made—made a mess, it wasn’t, didn’t mean to . . .” Still looking at Rachel, Linda reached in to flick on the light. “Oh, hon, I’ve seen enough from the hospital.”

“Hospital,” Rachel repeated.

“Yes, Atlanta,” Linda replied, smiling, “a lifetime ago.”

“Which one?”

“Peachmount.”

“Like . . . did you know a Marie Garcia?” Rachel said it before she realized how stupidly hopeful she sounded, as if that would bring Mama back. She didn’t even consider the possible time gaps, didn’t think that Linda could’ve been at the same hospital when she was probably already here. It made her dizzy to think about the distance, how the red strings of fate drew them together.

“I—it was a large building.” Rachel must’ve deflated because Linda’s forehead creased in pity.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Since 1998 or so.”

“But there are boxes.”

“Yes, it’s funny how you think you need to take everything. Anyway, hold on.” Linda retrieved a broom and went into the bathroom, as Rachel waited, a little peeved, goosebumps forming on her arm, ankles throbbing like she ran nine miles, ending up going in a circle.

When Linda came back with the broken angel in the dustpan, disposing it in the kitchen trash can, she returned and looked at Rachel’s feet.

“Are you hurt?” Linda said.

Rachel looked down, red on the white, fluffy rug. “No.” *Something else for her to stab me for.*

“No?” Linda stared. “You cut your foot. I need to see if there’s still a piece—”

Rachel backed away. “No, no you don’t.”

“Let me get a light. Or you could sit on the—”

“I said no.”

“You can’t let this get infected.”

“Why not? Maybe I don’t care.”

Linda’s lips pursed, and Rachel thought she saw annoyance, but something else clouded her eyes, a recognition. But there was no way Linda could know Rachel.

“Not now, perhaps, but you might one day.” A pause, and then her voice came out softer. “You can’t let them win.”

Rachel’s fists shook, her vision going red. “I didn’t.” Linda leaned back. “I didn’t *let* them do that to me!”

“Oh, trust me,” Linda murmured. “I know.”

She couldn’t let them win. Like it was a fight. Like she had time or energy to fight when she’d already fought through enough pain alone. Her dignity had been stripped from her, but she bet she was expected to force a grin and bear it. That, or revel in brutality like the other two people under this roof. But she didn’t want to hurt anyone. She didn’t want to be “strong.” She wanted to be left alone.

Straining to keep her voice from breaking, Rachel said, “They’ve already won, anyway.” They’d taken what they wanted and more. Nothing could reverse that. If Linda or Marcus killed a hundred people like them, she wouldn’t go back to how she was yesterday. Linda frowned, but before she could say anything else, Rachel sighed. “Can I at least get dressed first?”

“Yes, of course! But be careful of any pieces I—”

Rachel hurried into the bathroom and shut the door. She tossed the nightgown on the counter and let the towel fall to the floor, her foot throbbing.

Though she squinted to keep her vision blurred, she saw the bruises and teeth marks. She wrinkled her nose at her chest, which would still ache, though less like it did when she was eleven and it first started growing like two aliens making temples there. The way they pillowed out, it was gross. It meant she’d need to wear a bra soon, that she couldn’t avoid her

womanhood much longer. And then the boys who did respect her would look down at her.

As if that mattered anymore. They had already not respected her. There were about eight pads in the cabinet, which wasn't much. She wiped herself some more, leaving the pinkened washcloths bunched on the floor. She avoided looking at them, thinking of that mattress— nononononono. She was here to get dressed, nothing else. Then, she dressed, grimacing as if her body had changed its dimensions, straining even with how large the gown was. The fabric felt like it was made of cat tongues.

"Are you ready?" Linda said on the other side of the door.

"Yeah," Rachel replied.

Linda entered, examining Rachel, but breaking the stare off when Rachel awkwardly sat on the toilet, moving her foot away from the bloodied washcloths.

"You're really okay with a stranger wearing your panties?" Especially someone who was bleeding everywhere. Oh God, this lady's vagina had touched this. On the bright side, Rachel might bleed to death and end this embarrassment.

"I can buy more—or rather, we can buy you clothes."

This was real. She'd survived a massacre. What would the police think, her being the only survivor?

Linda knelt, and Rachel only just noticed the white plastic gloves, and she held a small bottle with a clear liquid and some cotton swabs.

"What is that?" Rachel said, pointing to the bottle. "Rubbing alcohol, to keep everything clean, as you know."

Clean. Rachel barked out a laugh, which made Linda's forehead wrinkle. "If I knew, I wouldn't have asked."

When Linda came close, Rachel tensed. This was too normal, too much after she'd had a whole different life two, three, four hours ago, till that exact second her world soured on her tongue.

Linda didn't do anything, let the moment sit, for some reason, probably for her own gain, though Rachel couldn't say what that gain was.

The cut on Rachel's foot throbbed, and Rachel nodded. Linda went to touch the ball of Rachel's foot, and when she tended to the cut, it burned,

but no more than everything else.

After a minute, Linda lowered Rachel's foot and stood. "Nothing embedded, thankfully."

Great. Rachel should've said thanks, as adults always insisted, but she only chewed her lip. She wondered where the man went, if he was sitting in his bedroom with that frown that looked like it was tattooed to his face. If he was thinking about smothering her in the night. Good luck. As if she could sleep.

"Where's the man?" Marcus, or whatever.

Linda said, "He's is in our bedroom. He didn't want to . . ."

"Deal with me?" Rachel said, harsher than she intended. Couldn't blame him for that. Her foster parents had been the same way.

"No, no, it's not that." It was that. Rachel had heard the judgment in his voice. "Make you uncomfortable. Stress you."

Too late. If she weren't so tired, she would've screamed. (Screaming didn't feel safe.) Of course she'd be uncomfortable. Stressed. Especially around a man. Logically, she knew not every man in existence would try to hurt her, but he had killed, or helped kill, her foster brothers, so everything else wasn't really much of a moral leap.

At once, she wanted to say everything, all the terrible things she couldn't say while trying to be Good when everyone always saw her as Bad anyway; she wanted to say everything, or nothing. Maybe, like puke, if she got it all out of the way now, she'd be empty and rest easy.

Rachel said nothing, did nothing, couldn't even cry.

"Your room is . . . we—I need to move some of the boxes, dust everything off, but then you can sleep. The bed is clean."

Rest easy. What a joke. Her muscles were all tired like leg cramps from a long run, like when she had to run laps in P.E. Except, her whole body. But even with that achy sleepiness, it was like lightning had been bottled in her, zapping her awake, running from the space between her eyes to between her legs to her toes.

They went to the spare bathroom with all the boxes, and Linda flicked the light on. Rachel looked at one of the boxes with perfect, straight-lined letters. It said in black sharpie, *Photos (Ma*). Linda didn't even look at the box as she set it down by the bookshelf.

“Who knew boxes of pictures could be so heavy? But anyway, that should do it.” A thick pause. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else, maybe a glass of—”

“No thanks.”

“Something to help with . . .”

“I just want to be alone.”

Rachel was left alone. When she rested on the bed, the linens thin and the top sheet scratchy, she hoped the pain medicine would finally kick in. That she would cry, that hours-long, nasty cry that would make her feel better once it was all done and her throat was raw. The room smelled of must, but it was hers. She’d had a lot of beds, and as much as she tried to think she might finally have a forever-one, she couldn’t hold her breath.

She didn’t remember falling asleep, but she remembered those lights, the ones that flashed when someone squeezed their eyes shut. They flashed like stop lights, slightly above, and no matter how much she tried to run toward them, she found herself mired in the same darkness.

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9

AS RACHEL LINGERED by the wooden arch that separated the hall to her bedroom and the dining room, Linda and Marcus sat across from each other at an oak table. They drank coffee while the cat, a big gray thing, ate its food, the dry food pellets and clumps of ground meat clapping and smacking on the metal bowl. Marcus worked on a—a crossword puzzle (was that it?) in a thick book, and Linda read *Something-Biology-Trauma-Something*.

The counters were painstakingly clean, and the entire room reeked of ammonia; it made Rachel dizzy when she walked in. She was self-conscious, standing there in another woman's nightgown. Marcus kissed Linda's hair and went into the living room, and if he saw her, he said nothing. Rachel wished to God Linda wouldn't smile in that way that reminded her of Mama.

The cat blinked at her by the pie rack, and just looking at it made her nose itch, though she was never diagnosed with allergies; it was just the idea of hair everywhere. When she was little and Mama and Papa had a cat, she had a strong fear of the hair getting in her nose and going in her brain, killing her. (Where did it go? Where did Muffin go?)

The gown she wore was thick and reached past her knees. Long, ruffled, white, made her feel like a peeled potato. Some grandma's dress. It was comfy after some getting used to, not that she slept much in the room that smelled of must and hastily applied window cleaner. Last night, after twenty minutes of sleep, she stared at the ceiling, a pain swelling behind her right eye, the rabbit too big for its cage as it burst out of her heart and climbed up.

Nevertheless, she might as well have walked in with nothing on with the chill raking down her spine like claws. Looking down, she realized even after washing herself, she'd gotten a little blood, now a faded brown stain, where the dress tangled between her legs. It made her hot, even when just last night, she had had a numbness.

These people had seen her. Naked. Bleeding. She couldn't process it. They saw her naked. They saw everything and looked at her like it was okay. At least, Linda did. And, being doctors, they probably x-rayed her mentally and saw every fracture along her brain. Maybe it was an adult thing, since the teachers, social workers, foster parents— everyone seemed to see it. Maybe all adults were mutants.

Moms and Dads saw their babies naked and bloody—and other things—for the first time, too; it was like when Mama showed her photos (Where did the photos go?) of when Rachel was just born, and it was the ugliest thing she'd seen.

"What is that white stuff? Looks like an egg," Rachel had said, thumbing the photo and tracing the curve of her tiny head.

Mama had laughed. "Amniotic fluid."

"Like—like antibiotics? Is that in eggs?"

Rachel shook her head. Not here. If she thought of Mama or Papa too much, sadness would infect those good memories. Or she'd be angrier.

Linda asked if she wanted something to eat. Flushed, exposed, Rachel shook her head and almost fled.

"What are you eating?" she asked Linda, her voice sounding strange and painfully new. Linda wore a purple floral blouse and cream skirt that reached her ankles; the blouse matched her lipstick, perfectly done and shining.

Linda paused and looked down at her food, as if she'd forgotten about it. "An omelet." She stood and, before Rachel could protest, took the full plate at an empty seat and handed it to Rachel. The fat omelet made Rachel's belly squirm in a way she wasn't sure was hunger or nausea, or some gross knot of both.

"Can I eat in . . ." Her room. "In the bedroom?"

Without missing a beat, Linda said, "Of course." And led her there.

Rachel should've added "alone," so her meaning was clear.

Sitting on the bed's edge, Rachel poked the fat omelet. Thankfully, it didn't bite. "It smells . . ." Weird. "Okay, I guess."

Linda smiled. "We try to excel at okay."

"What kind of meat is this? It's all stringy."

"It's a bit like bacon. Anyway, I—I've never asked about your diet. Can you digest cheese? Dairy?"

"I guess. I've never not-digested it." Rachel thought on it. Close to her nose, the meat didn't quite smell like bacon. Or look like it. She racked her brain for what else it could be. These people were murderers. Bacon. As a curious girl sneaking less wholesome books off the closet shelves, she had read about—

She dropped the plate, and it shattered by her feet.

Linda started, but instead of going to clean it, she took Rachel's hands and inspected her palms. Linda's touch was soft and smelled of strawberries, which slightly reminded Rachel of Mama's green apple lotion. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Rachel wrinkled her nose. Hurt herself. Yeah, obviously she was responsible for everything that hurt her up to this point. "No. It's not like I cut myself, because it didn't break till it hit—get—stop." Rachel jerked away. As silly as it was, she felt the urge to apologize. She broke plates, angels, herself; it wouldn't be too long till she broke them too.

A voice interrupted from the doorway, and Rachel stiffened when she saw Marcus ducking his head in. "What was that? Are you two okay?"

Linda waved her hand. "Yes, yes, only a little accident. We'll clean it up later."

When Marcus didn't leave, Rachel's heart slammed against her throat, and she swallowed to put it back in place. "Is this—is this people?"

Linda stared. "I—maybe? How would you know?" Maybe.

Fuck. She said maybe.

"I know how to use a search engine." After learning about how Jeffrey Dahmer preyed on black teenagers while she was on, of all places, Tumblr, she had searched for info about cannibalism and found, to her confusion, descriptions on what convicted cannibals thought human flesh tasted like. Like pig or veal, but a little different from both.

Linda blinked. Marcus did nothing. The hairs on the back of Rachel's neck bristled.

You're sick. And I'm sick for not running as far as I can. It wasn't that she wasn't horrified. She was curious, and recent events had dampened her horror. Not only did she watch Mike die, but . . . "Is it them? My . . ." Friends. Brothers. Rapists.

Linda looked affronted. "No. I wouldn't play with you that way. We didn't bring a freezer last night, or perhaps we could've, but I'd let you know first."

How considerate of her. God, why wasn't Rachel screaming? "You—okay, so this isn't a joke?"

Linda and Marcus looked at each in a concerned parent way, like when the kid wouldn't stop wetting the bed.

"I'll talk to her," Linda said, and Marcus hesitated, but left.

Rachel's heart pummeled her throat again. "That means you've killed other people." She should panic, vomit, scream, but after all that happened, it was as if a fuse burned out, only to surge back to life not at this moment but sometimes when she would least expect it, such as the dead of night when she awoke with a bitter taste in her mouth, nausea, and a hammering heartbeat.

All the same, it was like her life became a cubist painting she saw at a museum field trip, like she had really died that night and entered a segmented, whirling Hell. She wanted to die because she wanted to live—to live a life no longer an option, some grayed-out choice, a life torn away and replaced with a mockery of all she knew.

No smog, no honking cars, no easy chats. No hopscotching around broken beer bottles.

Linda was speaking as Rachel fell in her introspective hole, defending herself, "—other rapists, boys who thought their youth, pretty faces, and athletic scholarships could save them, so long as they were discreet and went somewhere quiet to take advantage of others. So long as they were in the church choir."

The shock, like post-adrenaline pain, finally came through. "You eat them. Dear God, you . . . you . . ."

Linda was wringing her hands, and Marcus—God, he had scared her when he'd just stood and watched. Did he actually exist?

Linda set her palms together. "Silly me!" Rachel'd never heard a real person say that. "I should've asked for your consent. I wasn't trying to sneak it past you. I'm sorry. I, you know—forget we don't exactly have mundane diets. It's been so long since we've lived with others different from us. And I've been trying to cut back on meat, other meats." She patted her stomach. "I can eat a whole cow, but the torture of innocent animals really isn't all that moral. Old habits die hard."

Rachel was unsure how to process Linda's flustered rambling. She was apologizing, not for killing and eating people, but for not letting Rachel know she was about to eat someone. A nice thing to do—the sorry, not the killing.

"I don't get it. You kill people. You saved me, and it's not that I don't appreciate it, really. Seriously, not joking, but why eat them?"

Amber eyes darkening, Linda said, losing her usual syrupy cadence, "It's the only way they become useful again."

Rachel wove her hands into her hair. "Shit."

Sitting on the bed, Linda frowned. "Oh, dear, please abstain from crude language."

"Are you kidding right now?" The sheer absurdity of a cannibal criticizing her manners only affirmed her previous thoughts. Nothing was real. She laughed and, when she met Linda's confused gaze, grew satisfied.

Linda said, "You don't need to eat it if you don't want to. We can have our dietary differences."

She was real casual about this, huh? *Well, aren't* you*?*

Scooting over so she could breathe, Rachel said bitingly, "What's for dinner, liver, fava beans, and Chianti?"

Linda wrinkled her nose. "Oh no, you have Amarone with liver, not Chianti. And I really try to avoid the liver. It's one of the least healthy parts to eat, especially because it has far too much Vitamin A. Also, you're far too young for alcohol."

She was right. The thought of alcohol made Rachel's throat dry and sour. A part of her thought Linda was criticizing her for drinking at the cabin

party, but no, she'd snapped at Marcus for doing that.

"When did you first start doing this?"

"This?" Linda asked.

"Listen, you got degrees. Don't make me explain it."

Linda's eyes darkened in recognition. "Marcus and I, or just me?"

"What?"

"Do you want to know when I started killing, or when Marcus started to, or both?"

Bitingly, Rachel replied, "Enlighten me on it all, I guess." She had officially lost it.

"Storytime." Linda hmmed. "I started when I was fourteen, my first divergence; Marcus didn't start till he met me about two decades later." Linda's voice reminded Rachel of the chirps of cardinals when they found seeds in the hollowed-out gourds, white as bone in the sun, strung along the clothesline by the walnut tree.

Decades. That was a lot of time to live, a lot more than Rachel thought she would. She blinked. "How old are you?"

Linda hesitated, as if she could divulge her dark deeds, but not her age. "Forty-two." Funny. She didn't look that old. It was abstract thinking people lived that long when she doubted she'd reach eighteen. Over twenty years of killing and eating people. For Linda, this was as routine as picking up the newspaper and checking the mailbox.

"Why kill anyone?" Rachel asked.

"We only kill those who have done evil." So, some Punisher or Dredd kinda thing. Here Rachel thought only white guys did that and got rewarded for it.

"How can you tell someone's bad? They don't have actual signs or anything." They should've.

"When you study people for a living—their bodies, that is—you catch on to things that give their true nature away. Where they look, the tics in their jaws and hands. Trust me, Rach. We spared you because you're good."

I also wasn't doing a lot of moving, so it's not like you could read the evil on my face. As Rachel squirmed, she couldn't deny how—was earnest the word? A fifth-grade vocabulary word. Real, that was it. How real Linda

was. She meant every word and wasn’t trying to sell Rachel some laced up and powdered bullshit.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Uh,” Rachel replied.

“You can say yes. You don’t need to hand me anything you aren’t prepared to give.” Linda said that, yeah, but from how little they spoke, she was always so much. Too much.

Rachel didn’t know how to back away. It wasn’t something they taught in school. The opposite, actually. “If I overstep my boundaries, you can always tell me so.”

“I just can’t really do words right now. Sorry, I just don’t . . .” She was apologizing. To a cannibal. A cannibal she actually kind of wanted to like her.

“There’s no need to apologize,” Linda said, as if coaxing an infant. “How are you feeling?”

Rachel huffed, scratching at her wrist. “Okay.”

Linda followed where Rachel scratched. Rachel worked to unearth what made her irritated and on the verge of crying, trying to pull out what made her unable to cry now. “That badly?”

“Hmn,” Rachel replied.

Linda raised a hand, and Rachel tensed. “You don’t need to speak about it, but you can.”

The scratching began to hurt, but it eclipsed the itch. “What’s there to talk about?”

Blue shadows shuttered Linda’s eyes like leaves shielding a flytrap’s teeth. “I understand more than you think I do, and because of that, there’s never any pressure.” Rachel tried to follow the logic. She didn’t want to pressure Rachel because she knew how Rachel felt. Yeah, right. Linda gently reached out, touching not Rachel’s hand, but her sleeve, with eyes that begged her to stop digging her nails into her skin without so much as a flicker downward. Rachel paused, staring at her wrist to realize, without feeling much of anything, that she drew blood. “Heal at your own pace.”

Rachel bore a hole into the books on the shelf. Even when she didn't look at Linda, her presence hovered like a ravenous—umbrella.

Ravenous. Umbrella. This was why she stopped writing. "Great, sure."

"Dear—" Linda cleared her throat and released Rachel's sleeve. "You need to disinfect that." That was her answer for everything. Like Rachel was an infection.

"My nails aren't dirty."

A tired sigh. "A band aid with ointment, then? You can apply it yourself, if you want." The tone was gentle and insistent at once. Paradoxes were Linda's thing.

"I don't want to," Rachel replied.

Linda cast her eyes down. "Fine." After a long silence, she said abruptly, "How do you feel about Marcus?"

Rachel wasn't too fond of him, enough to say she wouldn't be too bothered if he got hit by a bus or crushed by a rock. Okay, maybe crushed by a rock was too harsh. It'd probably be faster than the bus, though.

"He exists."

"He wouldn't hurt you. I know it's—it's what everyone says about the man they know, but he detests what happened to you, what those monsters did. That's why he helps me."

"Hm." She couldn't see Marcus feeling any strong way about her, except disgust. Like everybody but Linda, the weird one out.

"But I do see why you wouldn't be comfortable around him."

Rachel chewed on her bottom lip, fingers twitching. "He said he thought what happened was my fault."

"I—" Linda's mouth hung open, a pretty, purple O. "You heard that."

Rachel crossed her arms over herself. The righteous anger was the best thing she felt in a long time. "Yeah, I heard that."

Linda's lips thinned. "I corrected him."

Lowering her palms on the sheets, Rachel sighed. "You did."

“He realized he was wrong, but again, you have every right not to trust—anyone, really.”

Rachel asked, “Aren’t you going to smack me for eavesdropping?”

“Why on earth would I smack you?” Linda narrowed her eyes as they darkened again. Oil on creek water, the gentle gold-brown flooded by black. She stood, straight as a telephone pole, and Rachel tensed, looking at the door for an escape. “Did someone hit you?”

“My first foster parents.” Rachel pursed her lips, feeling silly for complaining. Lots of moms and dads hit their kids. “I was sort of a mess.”

“And so, they hit you.” Rachel didn’t see Linda sit, but felt the mattress dip beside her, heard it creak. “You know, Rach, I often miss being around others. You may’ve noticed I’m far from the quietest person.” She paused, as if waiting for Rachel to reply. When Rachel didn’t, she continued, “But I really don’t miss some aspects of civilization, if it can be called that. How funny.” She scoffed. “That humans think we can determine what’s civil.”

Not really listening because Linda said a lot, Rachel replied, “Right. But you’re human, I mean, just checking.”

“As far as I know.”

“Uhm.”

“Do you really blame yourself for what they did?”

“My foster parents?” Rachel asked.

“No, I—I ask because it seems as if you aren’t angry about what has happened, and I’m wondering if it’s because the anger is replaced by guilt.”

Rachel winced. It was like this woman who hardly knew her found all the exact ways to pierce her mind. She should hate Linda for assuming how she should act when it happened to her and no one else, but Linda knew too much. Knew her too well after not even a day together.

“I’m sorry,” Linda said, “I shouldn’t have—I thought I knew better.”

“Why did you call me that?”

“Call you what?”

Rachel crossed her arms and looked down. “You know.”

“‘Rach’? I’m sorry, I didn’t . . .”

Rachel coughed into her sleeve, which made Linda's brow furrow like a rabbit digging, no, wait, that was burrow. "No, I just—it's not bad, just—m'not used to it."

"Is there anything you prefer to be called?"

Rachel scrunched her brow. What a weird question. No one bothered to ask her that, which made her want to dismiss it. "No. I'm just a stupid slut. Who cares what I think?" If no one would say it aloud, she would.

Linda leaned back, eyes a fraction wider. "You're not that because of what *they* did. What happened was—it wasn't your fault. When I was your age, I had . . . I've had terrible things happen to me."

Rachel re-crossed her arms over herself. "Bad things happen to everyone. Doesn't mean you understand." Maybe she was being bratty, but she didn't care. Being nice had never helped her, and no one had ever cared to hear her stories about how much life sucked.

Linda looked disappointed.

Whatever. This lady didn't know her. She didn't know anything.

You said she did. She knows everything.

Rachel said, "What if I told you I'd been with them before that? Wouldn't I still be a slut? At least your husband was honest."

She couldn't read Linda's expression. "What do you mean by that?" "I was high. And drunk." Her teeth ached when she ground them together. Earlier that morning, when she brushed them, she spat blood into the sink. As if she'd never stop bleeding, stop leaking, till she died. "It's not your fault. You should be able to live as you want, whether I think highly of it or not, and not worry over being hurt in that way.

What happened in that place doesn't determine your worth."

Just kill me already. That was what she was good at, wasn't it? "And if you'd come in earlier when I was sucking them off? Did I tell you they were my foster brothers?"

Linda's hands were suspended, her eyes flitting back and forth, lips pursed.

"Ra—please. What good are hypotheticals about events that have already happened? All they do is torture us, torture you. You're here now, and to see this eating at you, it hurts me."

That took Rachel aback. “I’m sorry for, uh, hurting you.” She wasn’t, not really, only surprised. Hardly anyone cared when they hurt her.

“You know that’s not why I’m concerned. I may have the degrees, but I’m not one of those who thinks it takes a degree to be smart.” Was that a compliment? Rachel didn’t know much about tech-y stuff besides what Mama joked about, but Mama used to say when she was confused that it was like someone entered a two in binary. Here, Rachel could answer with a zero or a one, nothing or gratitude. Put something in the slot. Like she was one of those dinky gumball machines at the pizza shop on Peachtree Street.

She chose zero. “Last night, you said you had no one. If you had foster brothers,” Linda started, and Rachel tensed, “you have people looking for you.”

If you kill others, don’t people look for your victims? “They never paid attention to me, and they have no idea we came up here.”

For a second, Linda looked relieved. Heatedly, though she asked, “Did they hit you, those ‘parents’?”

Blinking, Rachel flinched away, and Linda lowered her hackles. “Not unless I was bad.” She was tired of the questions and the headache it took to stay afloat when all she needed was to sink.

“What does ‘bad’ mean?” Linda asked. Right, because she’d have a problem with determining that, moral divergence and all.

“Mouthy, cried too much, made them unhappy.” Rachel shrugged. “I guess.”

Standing again, Linda put her hands on her hips and paced. “Jesus. I’m sorry.”

Shifting, Rachel replied, more than a little wary as Linda moved about, “Shouldn’t you be more concerned that I was *with* people I was supposed to think of as brothers?”

Halting in front of Rachel, Linda slid her hands under her arms, as if she were cold. “They hurt you, their sister. Why would I be hostile toward *you*? What they did was unforgivable.” She made it sound so cut-and-dry.

“Unforgivable.” Rachel retorted, “And murder isn’t?”

Linda’s eyes flashed.

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“MURDER CAN BE conditional. What you went through never is. I don’t care what you were wearing or doing.” She said that, but she might have not meant it. Maybe right here, right now, she was manipulating Rachel like other people she’d probably killed. “In the most extreme circumstances, anyone can murder for survival, to protect themselves and those they love. You can’t say the same for what happened to you. What you absolutely-without-a-shadow-of-a-doubt didn’t deserve.”

As much as Rachel wanted to argue, both over the logic and Linda not saying “extremest,” she couldn’t find a counterargument. It was true. One could kill as an accident, or self-defense, but one couldn’t accidentally or defensively rape. Even if someone were drunk or out of their mind when they raped, people got drunk all the time without having something in them that told them to assault someone.

That almost-sorta-kinda made her feel better. For half a second. She rubbed her lips, fingers catching on cracked skin and picking at it.

“But,” Rachel started, “white people have called . . . not-white people cannibals for years when they didn’t do it, so they could take land and kill us. Conquer us. They said we were threats when we weren’t. Isn’t this feeding into that? Aren’t you just . . .”

Proving them right.

The more she thought about it, the more absurd it sounded. If an Irish person was a cannibal, did it mean the English accusing them all of doing it was proven correct? Linda wasn’t some stereotype. Rachel couldn’t say if she liked this woman, as human and outcast as she, but it said something she wasn’t running away, despite everything. This woman saved her. Before this, all the cannibals she heard of in the news were white. She saw white girls on Tumblr fawn over Jeffrey Dahmer, who had killed, raped, and eaten

black teenagers, in that order. Heart emojis. Calling him Jeffie. They did the same with guys like Ted Bundy. Ed Gein. Shooters. She doubted Linda or Marcus would get photosets and GIFs with rosy filters.

Linda gave a weary sigh, like Rachel had asked how babies were made. “Any evidence of cannibalism in history, no matter the culture, often stems from desperation and food shortages more so than exploitation. Isolated incidents in time. Do the Donner Party reflect their entire culture? And even the rare places where sacred cannibalism exists loathe the practice out of a certain time and place. They are never indiscriminately hurting others, but commemorating them, making them divine, like how pre-Christians eating flesh became communion.”

Rachel looked at her hands. “You can’t generalize everyone who does one thing.”

“Fair enough. But you can notice patterns.”

Commemoration didn’t seem like the name of the game here. “So why are you doing it? Because you need to or to hurt others?”

“Neither. Why must everything we do be put into—there’s a dichotomy. Do you know what that is?”

Rachel shook her head. “Some science thing?” That was her least favorite subject. Figured she’d find herself cooped up with two doctors.

“Good and evil, civilized or savage. And cannibalism is always seen as savage, but conquering land that isn’t yours, looting, murdering, abducting women to—you get the idea. It’s civilized, so long as you don’t eat someone. They’ll tear apart flesh, bone, and blood, not to protect, only because they can, but we’re the ones proving we’re ‘savages’ for taking back what we lost. Taking back our bodies by taking theirs after they’ve spent centuries doing the worst deeds imaginable. They would even drink human blood or put mummy ashes in their tea. No one sees the Victorians as barbaric. We don’t torture anyone. We don’t abuse them. It’s as quick as it can be. White people, they love their wolf-print shirts. Wolves eat their own. Consumption, standard. Hannibal Lecter gets to be sophisticated, and we get to be monstrous.” Her smile was easy, and so were her words, but she lost her smile, adding, “Who are the monsters? Us, or those who hurt people they should empathize with?”

“I never said anyone was a monster.” Rachel felt like Linda, with little, graceful daggers, lifted off her skin as she spoke. What she said made sense, though. Hannibal Lecter could still be classy and eat people, have people like him; he didn’t need to write a dissertation on how he’s not a symbol of all—whatever country he was from. “Bad” people were sexy, complex, cool, till they weren’t white dudes.

Kids who weren’t white were good till they did one thing, and then they were filthy savages, inhuman, thugs, and slavery and murder were all okay to inflict on them, all the ways powerful white people “protected” themselves from the powerless. After what her brothers did, they would’ve been seen as scared boys who acted out because of past pain, who made mistakes, but what of Rachel’s pain, what she carried between her shoulders since she was born?

Bad. Bad people. Linda wasn’t bad. Her foster brothers were. Not Linda. She’d saved Rachel; she was her hero. So was Marcus, not that she’d be thanking him. It seemed like he probably only did what they did because of Linda.

Rachel realized Linda never answered her question about why.

Maybe to her, it was what it was.

“If we looked differently, would you be asking these questions?” Linda asked. Rachel wanted to say that, hell yes, she’d ask literally anyone who ate human flesh why they did that when she wasn't busy running away.

Rachel tried to make herself all tough, shoulders straight, rubbing her wrists like a rich adult man with fisticuffs (or were they cufflinks?), but she only felt like she’d split in half again. She wondered if she’d ever heal. It sounded like an out-there dream or a bad joke. With every pang and twinge she had, it was like God wanted her to be humiliated, to remind her of that night. Like she needed help. Like she needed the hurt, the constant stony pain settled in her belly and lower. The wound that came from being a woman being ripped open and opened again.

Puffing up, Rachel said, “What if I think you’re a sicko?”

Linda looked away and pursed her lips in that way an old white grandma acted when she saw someone dancing to music in a grocery store parking lot.

“Between that and—what you said about that night, I didn’t study much psychology out of high school, which was practically a century ago, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you want to provoke me. Why?”

Rachel stared. Those daggers lifted up her skin again, peeled her off her own bones.

So you’ll kill me. Leave me. Whatever. Get it over with. Everyone left her, eventually, even when things started off great. Here, everything started off the opposite of great, so the chances of this lasting were as low as they could possibly be.

“You told me I didn’t need to talk if I didn’t want to.” Rachel should’ve said nothing else, but instead she added, “Sorry I thought making a joke about what happened was my right.”

She hadn’t really been joking about sucking dick. It was just a fact, a thing that happened no matter how she tried to forget it because she knew most people would hear about that and blame her. Linda didn’t, which must’ve meant she was wired wrong. Rachel had encouraged her brothers to hurt her when she started getting too clingy was what the social worker would say. What adults would say. What everyone would say.

Shouldn’t have been drinking. Shouldn’t have been in a stolen car at night. Shouldn’t have been too slutty. Good Girls didn’t do that; the things that happened to her were bad, sure, but mostly happened to Bad Girls who stayed out too late at night. Always her fucking fault no matter how she sliced it. It was like girls existed to give boys excuses to rape them with impunity. She wondered if girls ever did like boys enough to have sex, or if they just gave up fighting the inevitable.

Fuck this. Fuck that.

“Of course it’s your right, but it seemed like you were trying to make me—disturbed, see you in a different way.”

Rachel muttered, “Guess that’s a lost cause, huh?”

“Yes, well, I do hope you eat something. Your choice.” Linda smiled softly. Why did she keep mentioning choices? *Is she mocking me?* “I don’t mean that flippantly. What you do is your choice, and I’ll help to the best of my ability.”

Rachel’s self-loathing stuck by, her most loyal friend, drying on her tongue and making it taste bitter. “Why me? Why not someone better?” She

coughed into her sleeve, nose running.

“Better?”

“I was some orphan”—a slut, whore, bitch—“in a smoggy city with too much traffic. One out of hundreds, probably thousands. What makes me worthy? I was some sad and lonely kid.”

“That’s what makes you the most worthy.” Worthiest. “People like you—like us, abused and forgotten because we were born a certain way and given certain circumstances.”

Rachel needed to be broken for anyone to love her. She wanted to scream at the wrongness of it all. She deserved a scream or two.

Linda’s eyes drifted off, a light playing off them like water dancing off dark walls. “I’ve always wanted a . . .” Cleared her throat. “This isn’t about me.”

Of course she wanted something. Everyone wanted something. She wanted to mold Rachel into whatever she wanted, and Rachel wanted to disappear.

She stared at her hands, at her reddened forefinger. More than anything, she felt not what Linda said but how she said it. The desperation, how she said *us* to connect them, connect their losses. Like they shared losses. Or something. She remembered how Linda leaned into Marcus, and their shoulders sagged like they carried bags of pennies for the ferryman, tied there with string.

“You and your husband could have kids.”

“It’s—not possible.” In that moment, Linda clammed up. Rachel didn’t know what that meant. If Marcus couldn’t do the making-a-baby thing. If he said no. After the way he acted when Linda suggested Rachel stay with them, the last one sounded plausible.

“Sorry.”

“Doesn’t bother me at all. It’s nobler to help someone who needs a good home anyhow.” The curve of her lips and the small wrinkles under her eyes took on their purplish-blue shadows again. She was lying.

“I gave up on that a long time ago.” Rachel hated herself because she was still a child and, no, she hadn’t given up on needing parents. Someone couldn’t give up on needing something till they got it. She kept up the useless hope someone would love her for who she was. A pipe dream, since many parents didn’t even do that to kids with half their DNA.

“That?” Linda asked.

Rachel set her chin on her hand. “Parents. They just clock in and clock out.”

Linda sighed.

“You sigh a lot.”

Linda rubbed where the bridge of her nose curved beside her eye. “Do I?” She looked down, chest rising with a bottled sigh. Rachel looked away, something bubbling up in her.

Rachel blurted, “Next time you want to feed me something, tell me what it is. Every ingredient. I have a right to know, it’s my body. I don’t need someone to try and pull a fast one.”

“I—yes, yes, it wasn’t my intention to trick you. I will respect your autonomy, always.”

A few evenings later, Rachel woke up sometime later with the room dark. A flutter of panic settled in her chest; she hadn’t remembered falling asleep. As her eyes adjusted, she saw a little medicine cup on the nightstand, and when she took it and sniffed the contents, she grimaced. The sugar-overdose diarrhea of cherry cough syrup. She’d take her chances.

Quietly, she opened the window behind her bed, minding the spider eggs, and dumped the syrup in a stunted rosebush. When she closed it, the wood creaked, the cold curling in like long fingers against her cheek and falling on the sheets, which smelled of mouse piss, and she hurriedly bundled back up.

From her pillow, Rachel heard a thump and a sound like rough fabric and shoes dragging across the kitchen tiles. Someone shushing. She rolled over, digging her ear into her pillow and pulling the sheets and blankets over her head, twisting. Her eyes burned, not from tears, but from squeezing them

shut and demanding sleep. Wind lashed against the window, and the black walnuts hitting the tin roof sounded like gunshots.

When she dared to venture out of her room an hour later, Linda was mopping the tiles.

"Rach." A pause. "You look exhausted. Perhaps you should go back to bed?"

Rachel swallowed, a chill going up her back and rattling down her arms. "I heard someone . . . something."

"I'm sorry. Were you dreaming?"

"What was happening in here?"

"Nothing, hon—"

"Rachel, my name is Rachel." Her name was pill chalk. "How can I trust you with anything if you keep secrets? You've already told me you eat people. I saw you kill."

They stared at each other.

"It came from the work room," Linda said, which might've been true.

The cabin wasn't all that big.

Rachel looked down, nails biting her palms.

Another awkward pause. Linda breaks it. "I've been meaning to speak to you. Besides clothes, do you need anything? Anything . . .
monthly?" Why was she being euphemistic about that, given her old profession and current, decidedly politically incorrect hobby? "I looked, when we first—and we were lower than I thought, and I don't know your preference. Pads. Tampons. I must admit it's been awhile since I bought those."

"I haven't had my period since . . . I don't know." Rachel swallowed.

"What's today?" It was the fourth or fifth of January, maybe.

"The sixth of January." The day before her birthday. "It could be late because of your—stress." *Tomorrow's my birthday.* Not that it mattered. Wait, Linda was talking. Again. "It happens—or it's happened to me when I was close to your age, a thousand years ago. Are you sure you don't want us to examine . . ."

"No." Rachel paused. "Yes. I mean, yes, don't."

Linda pressed her lips together. Rachel didn’t know if she wanted this woman to scold her, to be just like the rest of adults, to call it quits, or to reach over and hug her till her ribs snapped.

“All right. It’s your choice.”

Choice. What a joke. Rachel laughed, and Linda shot her an odd look.

Tomorrow’s her birthday, she thought, and it was hollow.

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11

HOLLOW.

Rachel’s stomach was hollow, and she was disgusted with herself. After killing Marcus, she needed to do something besides burning the dress with his blood. She needed to tell the truth. But she couldn’t. She stood like she was half a foot tall and heard rustling in some dark bushes towering over her. She couldn’t jump over them or cross over to a world where she hadn’t killed him.

Marcus. The man she hadn’t trusted and refused to speak to for months. The most patient person she knew. The one person who rekindled her love of books after many discouraging years in public school. The person who held her hand without question when she . . .

She squeezed her eyes shut and sucked in a painful breath.

Marcus. Who, along with Linda, questioned what she thought of her own worth.

As early as the age of four, she’d been taught by the sisters that people lost value with each person they “fraternized” with in a sinful way. She had not only chosen to sin but the right to choose to sin had been taken from her after a certain point. If she chose to sin, it wasn’t like when some white kid smoked weed; she would have the whole world bear itself on her and tear her in two, and that was what happened. And, like everything else, it was her fault. Allegedly. What bullshit.

She blinked, eyes wet, and she was back in bed. Years back. Younger, unsure, scared. As the days after her rape passed, disgust didn’t stop her from picking her nose and ears and wiping the earnings on the back of the nightstand. In a way, it felt good to give up, to stop insisting she was worth something; she had spent too long fighting. Linda told her it wasn’t her fault

what happened, but that was Linda with her own self-serving motives, as even the supposedly nicest people had.

Nice people wanted something. A compliment, a kiss, more. Every nice person was really a manipulative person with something to gain.

Her social worker, her teachers, and her foster parents wanted her to behave.

Her foster brothers wanted her to submit.

Linda wanted Rachel to see her like a mother. An honest murderer, but a mother, nonetheless.

Marcus wanted—she didn't know what he wanted. Maybe nothing.

He just existed.

But Linda spoke softly to win her trust, rationed physical affection to suit Rachel's fluctuating comfort level, and Rachel didn't know how she felt that either Linda had won *some* of it, or that she was desperate for someone to give her warm food and ask her how she felt. And she got it. Worse, though she never admitted it aloud, she enjoyed it.

She got the concern, and she could have more, like hugs. Hugs. If she asked for them, which she didn't. She couldn't remember the last time someone hugged her. She had a mom, sorta. She could maybe have Marcus, a dad. But that meant if she got more, she would lose more. She'd lose who she was before. Not that she liked that girl.

(She could lose Linda and Marcus too, though Marcus wasn't hers, anyway.)

A lot to think about in a strange limbo where she was given many choices, but, as always, she had none. It was like asking her to decide between staying in a blood-filled house or running into a tornado. It hurt, that teetering edge between survival and oblivion.

It hurt to be this alone.

I was nothing to them. Her brothers. She was nothing to everyone. They simply looked at her and deemed her unfit for kindness and respect, all while demanding her to sacrifice everything for them.

To make the days pass quicker, she slept often and dreamed of being carried away to a land of deer skulls, of being thrown around as shadows

with long arms laughed. Of the lightning bugs she couldn't touch no matter how close her fingers got. Some mornings, she felt dead. Those were the good mornings. It'd hurt to come back to life. She imagined Christ returning to his beaten and savaged body, reacquainting himself with every scar and hole in the softly quiet darkness he'd been left in. That soft quiet darkness was better than adjusting to light; it was more comfortable and easier to stay in bed and let the shadows roll over her, settling on her spine like warm water.

Nothing changed, so she didn't have to worry about caging herself from new dangers. Only old ones. She couldn't bleed if she didn't run into the brush.

So, there she was. Frozen, eyes taking in the dying light in such a way that she was every line, crack, and tear in the old room while a blur of swelling shadows bathed everything.

Some mornings, she woke up with the same, clear wetness she had before and during her rape and hated her body for betraying her. She betrayed herself or, as one of Papa's morbid fairy tale books said, Ich esse mich. When she looked in the mirror, she made sure she didn't see herself. On her face, it was so obvious, the brokenness. It was like the scents animals used to attract each other, except the opposite: no matter how many bruises faded or how much she did to hide herself under a mask, anyone could see how ruined she was and, like always, they'd run off.

Except Linda.

January went to February, and February to March, and March to April. She spent most of her time sleeping or sick, stomach revolting against her. It was still bitterly cold.

She hated Linda's pity. Hated it because she ate it up and wanted more. She wanted, needed what she couldn't give into, couldn't gain just to lose Mama and Papa. (Papa waiting for Mama with a bouquet of flame-orange tiger lilies, her favorite.) In a hospital or a bloody pool in the kitchen she'd crawled on as a baby, sliding her belly along cool tiles to a cat staring warily at her. Mama had died last, six hours in a white bed.

Snot dripped from her nose and settled in globs at the back of her throat. She was queasy all the time, waking up in the middle of the night with acid burning at the base of her throat, and the metallic taste in her mouth didn't

help. A clear discharge continued to stain her panties, much to her embarrassment, and she had trouble pooping. She developed a cough she tried to mask, but it scraped her throat.

She muffled her coughs at night with her pillow, balling it hard against her and inhaling the faint must. As an escape, Rachel went back to stories, nonsense stories. In bed, she watched the writing spider in the upper-right corner and thought of climbing hills and killing witches and giant spider people. Of being someone big when she couldn't leave the bed and curled up to make herself small.

Linda continued being Linda, concerned and gentle, hesitant and hovering, always stopping short of doing what she wanted. Rachel wondered how long she could test Linda before she snapped. Meanwhile, Marcus would stand around like one of those wooden nutcrackers Mama used to set out around Christmas. Its cheeks had been a fine shade of ocher, and it had had a coarse, black beard.

He (Marcus, not the nutcracker, but who knew anymore) was a killer like Linda. But somehow different. Whenever he was around, panic festered in the pit of her belly, alongside everything else, creeping up her ribs.

One morning, she woke up with Marcus bent by the bookshelf, hand hovering over the spines. He muttered to himself, and that and his glasses reminded her of an elementary school librarian who would gently joke at her when she checked out more books than her thin arms could carry.

"Save up some shelf space for the book fair," he would say with an open grin, patting her head as she flashed him a snaggletooth grin; that'd been when she trusted people without question.

Rachel and Marcus peered at each other for what felt like a minute, but surprisingly, her skin didn't crawl. It comforted her, in some strange way, that he looked as awkward as her with his unblinking eyes and not-quite-frown.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" He curled his fists in his pockets. He was nervous, she realized. Rachel didn't know she could make anyone nervous. Often, she was the one imposed upon, and scaring someone else

made her feel powerful. With that power, a queasiness rolled over her stomach.

She looked down at her hands bunched up in the sheets and replied, “Yes.” It wasn’t his fault, except the whole killing thing, and she did feel a little guilty distrusting him because he was a man—a man intimidating only with his height and little else. As much as she tried to logic herself into feeling differently, as much as Linda insisted he was good (for a serial killer), she wasn’t ready to be around him yet.

He gave a fraction of a nod and left.

Thinking on life back home (“home”), her back felt like it'd snap like a branch in a storm. That metallic taste flooded her mouth. Everyone wasn’t a racist till they were. At school, the teachers supported her, till they didn’t; her peers included her, till they didn’t; her foster families loved her, till they didn’t.

Linda killed people. Marcus killed people. Killing people was bad.

Basic stuff.

Maybe they deserved it.

“Rachel?” Linda stood in the doorway. “You’re shivering. Is it—can I take your temperature? You can hold the thermometer and everything.” Linda held her hands up, emphasizing her words.

“I’m fine,” Rachel said, sounding like a dying frog. She cleared her throat. Smooth. “Just my lizard blood.”

Linda frowned, darkness in her eyes. That was interesting, and Rachel had to admit, she liked interesting, even if it meant something dark. “You’re not fine. We—I know you might’ve been told you need to be perfect, need to never disrupt anything, but you can tell me anything. There’s really nothing I haven’t heard or seen before.” She gave a little laugh, a mom laugh.

That messed with Rachel. It was as if Linda had read her thoughts, and it scared her. Scared her more than the idea of Linda hurting her. It scared her to think she’d reveal herself, and Linda would see she was an imposter, a fake kinda-daughter, and then, worse than death, she’d dump Rachel somewhere, too nice to kill her, as if killing her was the worst option.

Rachel shrank her shoulders and ducked her head. “Sorry.”

When she met Linda’s eyes again, they were wide and confused, which made her wonder if she imagined the shadows.

“What is it?” Linda said, quiet.

You scare me. You’re so different. I want you to like me. No, Rachel wanted to love her, and be loved, but she couldn’t let Linda disappoint her.

Rachel said, “Nothing.”

Linda pursed her lips together, chest swelling a little when she took in a sharp breath. “Get yourself some water. It’s from the well, and I’ll—let you get it yourself, so I don’t make you uncomfortable.”

A copper taste flooded Rachel’s mouth, and she looked at her own hands, which looked, for all intents and purposes, like good hands, if she were a reliable hands judge. It took her out of her to see a part of her body she didn’t hate in a sea of parts that didn’t fit, parts that always hurt. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate . . .”

“I know.” Linda looked away as she said it, as if to say, sure, she got it, but it didn’t mean she still didn’t prefer a functioning human being, but hey, you take what you get. It was what her foster parents learned, for a time. “It’s not as if I expect you to settle in immediately, nor do I expect you to act any sort of way.” *But you do.* She wanted a daughter, not a pitiful charity case. “Your hair is so beautiful. Would you like me to bring you a brush?”

Most women who commented on her hair were white, and they’d touch it without asking and pulling away like they were shocked, exclaiming with a little red O, “It looks so pretty, but it’s so *coarse*!” Rachel had the kind of hair certain women critiqued but wanted, wanted in a way they could use like a wig to take on and off as they pleased.

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t really care.” It was hair. If she didn’t like it or if it got too tangled, she could cut it.

“Are you sure?” A woodpecker hammered away outside, and Rachel jumped; Linda didn’t acknowledge it. Walnuts fell, ricocheting and echoing. “Could I brush it for you?”

“I wouldn’t like that.”

The hurt in Linda’s eyes made Rachel reconsider for a second, but words were lost on her. “Right, of course, dear—Rachel.” Linda swallowed that dear and looked to her hands, circled like Mama’s bandages, the ones little Rachel would wrap around her stuffed dogs and bears and they grew hard, like white shells.

If only Linda knew that Rachel wanted to say yes, wanted to say her hair felt like a hundred pounds. Let someone else take care of her body for a while, so she didn't need to. Because it was awful heavy, and souls had weight limits.

“You know, when I look at you, I see . . .” Linda pursed her lips. “Nevermind, it’s asinine.”

I see myself. But that was stupid. Rachel leaked from everywhere, and Linda was perfect.

“Asinine?” Rachel asked. She’d found that word in a book and liked it because it sounded strange and would’ve made her laugh if she still could.

“Stupid,” Linda said, adding quickly, “me, not you.”

As the sunlight thinned, Rachel stayed in bed because she had little else she wanted to do. A few days ago, Linda had pointed out a blank journal (“I always meant to write in it, but somehow it’s so much *pressure* to write every day.”) on the bookshelf, as well as old 80’s dime store mystery novels hidden by the medical texts. Rachel couldn’t unfreeze her limbs. Had her own stories anyway. She did nothing, said nothing till Linda sighed and walked out, shutting the door.

Rachel didn’t need a mystery; she needed answers. She knew who the killers were, but not why or how to go from here, if going was an option. The whole “what are you gonna do when you grow up” question was bad, but now it felt impossible. She’d always been dependent on others, and now going off to get her GED and commuting to college while coming home to a nice cabin dinner didn’t feel like how things’d go once she was an adult. As her body froze, her thoughts sped up like a hummingbird swallowing honey, slowing down to savor the darkly sweet moments. It felt good to not worry over school and homework she would work on for hours only for the

teachers to scoff over messy handwriting and misplaced commas. But the price—the fact that aching all the time felt like an accomplishment, that she'd been taught being a ghost in her own body made her strong . . .

She hated it.

When the room was almost completely dark, she turned on the lamp, somehow relishing the metallic click. Sliding off the bed, arms sluggishly hanging by her side, she took the journal off the shelf and opened it. It seemed it wasn't as blank as Linda remembered, even as— what was the word, meticulous? A good CRCT word. For nerds. Rhymed with ridiculous. Medic lettuce. Letting Jesus. As meticulous as Linda was.

Numbers covered half of the first page in black, neat penmanship. By the numbers were lists of food and house supplies.

Ugh, celery was gross. There were words at the bottom, but they'd been scribbled out. When she turned to the next page, it was blank. Digging a pen out of the nightstand, she pressed it to the paper, but the pen didn't budge. Which was bad, since she had hoped it would do the work her hand couldn't.

It was stupid. She had nothing to say. Okay, in school, she liked Language Arts, but she'd never been good at writing. She liked doing it, but then she always did it wrong, so it felt worse to fail at something she thought she'd succeeded in. So much rolled around in her head, and she wished she could turn herself inside-out for five minutes, so they could spill out, and Linda or Marcus could get a mop. When it came to writing her thoughts down, she drew a blank. If they remained in her head, maybe she

could fool herself into thinking they were fake, insignificant. That they'd pass, melted snow on a hot palm.

After staring at the fat writing spider on the ceiling for about an hour, her vision blackened. She tasted the green woods (*but it's still cold out*) and heard the hushed blooming of pink flowers. The bark whispered, and she followed the voices. She looked down and tried to pull her nightgown over herself, but it was stuck to her belly, leaving her embarrassed at all the black, glossy eyes staring at her in the bushes. Her panties were spotted with blood. She wanted to burn them.

But what did I do? What do *I do?*

She walked slow, first setting her toes on the ground, rife with moss and red clay, and then settling the ball of her foot down, letting her bones fall and adjust to the swell of the earth. She spread her palms, sticky with something she couldn't bear to see, over her navel in a desperate attempt at modesty. Red lights like fireflies, gator eyes, dipped in and out of the growing trees, which grabbed at the sky.

In a clearing, Rachel found someone, something, but before she could call to them, she looked up in the trees again and swallowed a scream. Animal limbs hung from dogwood branches, alight like Roman candles. Nightlights. By her foot, a white rabbit ate wolf entrails. The thing in the clearing, basking in the amber glow, came into view, and she stiffened. It was a tall white bird with an old woman's face and silver feathers. It hacked out black strings of blood, and its long, white neck twisted. The beast writhed till it plopped on the ground and hair sprouted on its face. It coughed out something wrinkly and red, giving a last shudder.

Padding over, Rachel looked down at the thing—no, not a thing. It looked soft and curved its spine like a peanut. It had ears, too, ears that wrapped over its skull like the outer lining of a seashell. When she knelt and tried to pick it up, it barely took up her whole palm before it fell on the grass and leaves with a squelch. She tried again, finally cradling it, but when she moved backwards, the cord still connecting the little thing—the little rabbit—to the thing's mouth grew taut.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said. "You don't deserve this. I do love you. I'm so sorry. They ruined us. I'm ruined. I did love you. I do love you. Do you love me?"

Rachel opened her eyes to find herself in bed again, a hideous bear sneering down at her. Its weight crushed the air from her lungs. She shoved it, ramming her knuckles into its green eyes, pushing at a sea of coarse fur. It opened its mouth to reveal yellowed, pointed teeth. She froze, the teeth nicking her thumb. Its face shifted like a tangle of cypresses swaying in the shadows.

Red hair. Green eyes. Mike. Blood dribbled from his mouth and plopped into hers, his green eyes wide with panic. She shuddered.

No no NO.

His face became larger, became the ceiling, the sky, and his red hair caged her body like bristles, and he was no longer Mike, but a thing, a terrible thing of claws and teeth. A moon-creature. That's right. He hadn't always been evil. The moon had ruined him.

She had ruined him.

After Rachel blinked once, just like that, he was gone in the moonlight slashing the sheets. She raised herself up by her palms, gasping, and she scrambled to her feet as heat flooded her throat. In the first second she was awake, she shook away the dream (dream? vision? memory?), hoping it'd fall like dandruff.

It worked.

Swallowing vomit, she collapsed on the sheets to sleep, scoring them with sweat. She didn't remember what she dreamed of because her sleep was so light, she couldn't remember if she slept at all by the time she woke up, puked in the toilet, went to bed, puked again. Again and again, she got sick no matter how much ginger ale and anti-nausea medicine Linda gave her. Again. Like she relived the night her parents died, like she relived the night her foster brothers died.

Again.

Again.

Again, she paced. Four hours since she killed Marcus.

She killed him to survive.

That was a lie. She killed him for someone else to survive, and Linda would never forgive that.

It’d been nearly four hours since Linda left. Rachel paced from the living room to her bedroom, decided to lie down, but couldn’t sleep, so she would knee-up on the ugly-as-Beelzebub sofa to watch for Linda like she’d watch for Mama. She worried her lips till they hurt, and then she worried them some more. When she swallowed blood, her belly soured; her soul soured. A glimpse of green-yellow light beyond the living room window. The lightning bugs were awake.

Lightning bugs, the Thing-of-the-Woods, she took it like someone floating helplessly and looking down at a dying planet, or a newborn star, or something not yet known swimming through existence toward her, unraveling everything in a darkness as bleak as the time she found herself alone, alone, cold—

She’d done the right thing. She’d saved an innocent.

Killed someone because she finally made a stand against killing.

The green burned through the window, and something like a long claw scraped the window, making one single, descending line. She jolted off the couch, back hitting the floor, the rug scraping her elbows, and she scrabbled up. A scream, so distant it was like hearing a train on the other side of the neighborhood. And then another—a small thing turning itself inside out.

Rabbits bleeding, always bleeding. When would she stop bleeding? Her stomach turned on itself, a pendulum off its rhythm, a gator doing a death roll. Her chin clonked against the toilet lid, and she emptied food she didn’t remember eating. When she looked in the mirror, her hair was crinkled like bent wires, eyes leaking tears; her knuckles, swollen like welts, paled against wrinkling petals of polyester.

Her lips were cracked stucco with grooves that hadn’t been there before, the kind of grooves someone bit into their skin when they tried not to scream. She wet her mouth with a damp washcloth, folded it in half and pressed it to each eye to reduce the swelling.

She killed Marcus.

His quiet dignity. Graceful fingers with hooked needles. His hand on hers as she fell. What she had once seen as coldness she had learned was defensiveness. They were more alike than she knew when they first met. He had taught her strength when she let him.

And she killed them. In a sick way, it made sense that one of them would end the other.

She'd killed Marcus, and Linda would kill her.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said to her reflection. "I'm so sorry. I loved you. I love you."

The front door opened, and her heart, rather than breaking her ribs, stilled. If it was over, it was over. She had fought off the Thing-of-the-Woods, waiting to add her to its pelts. Long enough, and finally, finally, it would be over.

But God, after everything regular people put her through, she hadn't survived this much to die by the claws of some motherfucking *thing*.

Raising her head, she stepped into the living room, ready to face the monster, ready to—

Linda, a watercolor painting almost dried before rain set all the colors off. All in all pretty much intact, no maimings in sight. Eyeliner smeared, hair somehow more perfect than Rachel's but still disturbed. Expression drawn, eyes carefully blank, top lip quivering. Back straight, hands and dress streaked and caked with dirt and red clay.

Dirt on her cheek, lined by tear tracks.

Rachel took a step. "M-Mom? Are you . . ."

The next sound was a loud sigh, but neither of them had made it. It was the woods relaxing its joints, rolling its wrists and ankles for the next round.

Linda's voice was hoarse, a croak. "Rach, I—I need to tell you something."

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12

RACHEL SWALLOWED, NOT sure what to do with her face. “I don’t, God, your . . . everything.” She stepped forward and hovered her hands over Linda’s stained sleeves.

Go ahead, ask when Marcus is coming in.

Shut up.

Rachel’s hands shook continued, “What is it? What happened . . . did you find . . .”

Convincing. She wouldn’t expect a thing.

“I . . .” Linda swallowed, sweat along her hairline. “I found him, and he . . .” Trembling, Linda inhaled. It sounded like something cracked in her, tried to force its way out her throat. “He—he wasn’t breathing. He’s not . . .”

Rachel’s eyes widened. Thinking on it, she put a hand to her collarbone. “No.”

“He’s dead, Rach. I’m so sorry.” Rachel imagined Linda had said something like that before to the families of old patients, but not about her husband.

Rachel needed to cry, now. But she’d been sucked dry.

“Oh my God. No, nonono. It can’t be . . . no, no.” The part of Rachel that didn’t feel despicable, trapped in a sticky, swampy guilt, realized she wasn’t acting, but releasing what she had to keep quiet when she came home. “You’re sure, really sure?”

“I . . .” Linda shuddered, clapping her hands over her mouth as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I—I carried him.” Just imagining it made Rachel

crumble. “I swore I heard leaves crackling—I—I think someone killed him and ran like a goddamned coward.”

“Maybe—it was an accident. Maybe he fell.”

Linda rose a fist and placed it to her collarbone, rocking in place. “No, no, it wasn’t a mistake. I’m sure of it.” As if realizing something, she looked to Rachel, whose heart plummeted. Linda stepped close, and Rachel froze, debating if she should run, wondering if Linda had taken the knife that had fallen—had she left it there? She was so close, so close to—

In one swift motion, Linda enveloped her and began to sob on her shoulder, and her guardian no longer smelled sweet, but of rain and earth. After her initial shock wavered, Rachel leaned in and wrapped her arms around Linda’s waist, letting her hands dangle oddly like rags. They crumpled to the floor, the rug scraping their knees.

“I swear—whoever did this, I’ll keep you safe, little rabbit. I swear on it.” It wasn’t the tears that made Rachel’s blood still, but the edge in Linda’s voice, that hoarse, low promise amid the terrible grief. She imagined if Linda had died instead, Marcus (*God, he’s really dead. I really killed him.)* would be pitiful, inconsolable. Drawn into himself, inert with depression. Catatonic. But Linda—her palm was not only cold on Rachel’s shoulder, but it made Rachel fear their skin would be fused together. One in blood, one in sin.

Rachel looked down at their laps, Linda’s ruined dress.

“Look at us,” Linda murmured faintly, putting her muddied, bloodied hands to her face.

Rachel croaked, “We would’ve matched.” *If I hadn’t burned the dress I was in when I killed him.* And Linda laughed, a sweet, short noise. The morbid humor was a bright, dying star in an encroaching sea of dark. They each laughed, their one little ferry coin before they crossed a space they’d never come back to, ever.

“Dear, it sounded like—smelled like—you roughed yourself up.” “Yeah, it was real nasty, you know, shallow wounds bleed a lot, but I fixed myself up.”

“Oh, good. I know how you are with . . . I would’ve done it myself, if I hadn’t . . .” She moved her head, so Rachel couldn’t see her face.

The morbid, unhappy laughter in their voices reminded Rachel of a moment that felt like an eternity ago when she and Linda sat on the bed and laughed about—no, she couldn't think about that. It was the past. She couldn't change it.

Linda went to the work room, and when she returned, she held a shovel.

Rachel swallowed. "Where are you going?"

"I need to bury him," Linda stated, as if it were an old, simple truth.

"We. We need to bury him."

"Honey." Linda put a hand on Rachel's cheek. "Lie down. Do anything, but not this. There's blood. I know how you are with blood."

I helped you kill someone yesterday. You don't think I can help you bury my dad? Dad. She still didn't know how to feel about that, even after his death. It wasn't that Marcus hadn't loved her, that she hadn't loved him.

The words almost left her lips, but she wasn't the sniping girl she'd been. That girl had been a fighter, and then she stopped fighting with words and fought with quiet, with reflection and waiting. Now, she needed to continue the latter fight, to let the storm roll as it would and to measure the torrents as they came.

And if the Thing-of-the-Woods comes for us—maybe it should.

Rachel scratched her arm, deep enough to ensure she was alive.

"We're not going to . . . ?"

Linda wrinkled her nose. "I would never disrespect his body that way."

She had made it sound like she was making worthless people worth something in death, and besides, humans were just overgrown pigs that walked on two feet.

"They abandoned him, left him to the wolves." Wolves ate their own. "If we just bury him, won't he be dug up?" Rachel asked, mouth trembling, feeling as it moved a second after each word like a hiccupping car on a potholed highway.

"Not if the hole . . ." Linda's mouth quivered, her mouth shifting from a frown to a scowl, and back again. "Not if it's deep enough."

"Are you sure you can handle that?"

"I have to."

Rachel regretted saying she'd help the moment she went out the front door, the hardness of the dark earth shocking her ankles when she hit the ground, which once softened by rain, had started to harden with the dropping temperature.

Marcus, there. Half-illuminated by the porch light. Dead. Like he was nothing. In the darkness, she hardly saw anything, but she imagined the blood crusted on his head. No, she couldn't see the—

His glasses were gone, making him look younger and softer. She saw the new snowflakes on his brow, his body too cold to melt them.

Silence. Linda's breaths were a long stream of frost.

"Rach?" Linda whispered.

A bobcat sniffed Marcus' hand, lifting its gold-green eyes to peer at Linda and Rachel. Fearless, Linda stormed over. Rachel had never seen someone fight a bobcat, but she thought she was about to see it.

"Get away from him," said Linda with a low menace.

It raised its fur and darted off.

As if continuing a conversation they never started, Linda said, "I may not be as much of a gardener as he is—was, but it's far from the first hole I've dug."

Linda dug the hole, and even though she was helping, Rachel did nothing. This, the hole, it reminded her of—*no, no, shut up.*

It was wrong. This happened to Mama and Papa. It could've happened to Rachel. Hurt, and then discarded. The normal way of things. They were all seen as broken and expendable, like a busted radio. Deserving of it all.

More snow began to fall. The snow, the grave—it all reminded her of—nope. Not now.

Never.

Linda's shoulders drooped as she leaned over the shovel.

"I need to," Linda said, a full sentence.

"Need to . . . ?"

Linda went over to Marcus and knelt. Rachel looked away, so she only saw Linda's hand, but didn't see where they moved. A prickling chill settled in her lungs with each schiff-schiff of disturbed dirt.

For what was an hour, Rachel stared at the sky, the lights fading, falling where she was as the lightning bugs (or was it the snow?) lulled about. The sky became darker from left to right, as if some creature killed the stars crawling across the blue-black. The snow came down harder, an oppressive avalanche of white.

When she looked back to the earth, Linda was done and leaning on the shovel, face completely lost in the night.

“It’s fine,” Linda was saying. “Everyone dies. We all bleed red. It’s all a matter of making sure the scales even out.”

Goosebumps crawled over Rachel’s arms. Those words reminded her of when she was little and obsessed with Egyptian mythology. Mama would buy her picture books on the subject matter, and Rachel would scroll through sites about the many gods. Most interesting to her was the ritual about how souls either went to the afterlife of were destroyed. Their hearts would be placed on one side of a scale with a feather on the other. If the heart was lighter than the feather, the soul could move on. If their heart was heavier, it would be eaten by a crocodile-headed demon, and the soul would die forever.

If they weighed Rachel’s heart, what would happen? She swallowed, belly churning. *Would you be eaten like you’ve eaten others? Are you the crocodile? Would you eat yourself?*

She shut her eyes, and the darkness—it meant no green eyes, no thing hunting her. It was warm, that beating part of herself as snow quietly swung and spiraled down.

“The heart would always lose,” Mama would say, never one for metaphors.

Ich esse mich.

Looking at Marcus’ grave, hearing Linda sniff, Rachel said, “And how do we balance the scale?”

Linda looked out, eyes shining with tears, shining like white fire as the snowflakes flashed and died on her skin. “We find who did this.” She looked to where her husband rested. “I find them, and I’ll give them what they gave Marcus.” Her voice cracked his name in half. “A thousand-fold.”

“Is that balance?”

Linda's jaw set. "You're right, I suppose." She coughed into her hand. "I've never been one to settle for cutting it even." Even with tears falling and turning to ice at her feet, Rachel saw Linda frost over and, instead of splintering and falling on the hardening grave, become whole, a new whole, a whole Rachel couldn't accept without fearing she'd turn to stone with a single look.

Linda lurched to the front door, holding the door open for Rachel. As Rachel went to follow her, she looked out into the woods, which lost itself to the snow. She swore that in what darkness was left, a glint of two green eyes leered at her, glittered on the snow like Christmas lights, or broken glass. It reminded her of when she took a field trip to the Okefenokee, and at night, she was given a special light that reflected off the gator eyes on the back, and through the darkness was a long string of red dots. If she flashed a light in the woods now, she wondered how many eyes she'd see.

Inside, Rachel made coffee, for no other reason than to futilely ward off the cold. She got the grounds all over the counter as Linda messed with the dishes behind her. Rachel's hand curved along the coffee pot, and she ignored when it started to burn. She didn't drink any and, deciding she didn't want to burn the cabin down, turned the machine off.

She sat slumped on the couch, and she had forgotten the yarn basket in the corner with Marcus' needles glinting like bronze fangs.

Linda stood hunched at the kitchen sink, the curve of her back making Rachel anxious because she imagined her skin, the fabric growing thinner till it hugged her spine. She imagined the blood thundering down from her throat to her arm, down to her hand arched and deathly still on the counter.

She knows. This woman, her mother, the person who saved her from being a footnote, a dead child soon forgotten. But how could she? Maybe if Rachel had died that night and her foster brothers went back, she would be missing, but girls like Rachel wouldn't get much airtime, either here in the mountains or in Atlanta.

Linda made no sounds, and neither did Rachel. Only the snow fell, already apparently forming hard clouds on the tin roof, slid down and hit the ground like a body. Heavy silence between her and somebody else wasn't unknown to Rachel; it was normal in these parts, since speaking

about anything uncomfortable was considered impolite, an affront to Southern hospitality.

If you had a problem, you kept strong and did like all people did: stifled it in the dark of your closet.

And now, it was as if Linda was that closet. Her twitching jaw, her trembling hand with a bulging vein. Her skin was shrinking around her bones. Tightening around her anger and grief till it was all that was left.

Rachel looked down at her hands. Her fingers were long, like Linda's. Delicate, if someone could call their own hands delicate; it was often men with ascots talking about women's body parts. And that's what her hands were now, a part. Nice because they were separate from her.

No matter how much she scrubbed them, they still felt sticky.

They had killed someone.

She had killed someone.

In the kitchen, a scream. Loud clattering. Rachel jumped up, hands still out. She saw what happened two seconds after. Linda threw a soapy pan across the room, and it hit the dining table with a clang. She threw everything; Rachel thought she'd rip out the sink. Water sloshed on the tiles, and Linda knelt on the floor, crumpling like a palmed dandelion, and screamed again.

Rachel froze.

Do something.

She took a step, but stopped, hands shaking.

She's your mother. Rachel tried to control her breathing. Each of Linda's sobs lodged in Rachel's throat. *God, help her.*

As she stepped closer, the lights went out. Came back on. Flickered.

Blood, Linda's arm, there was blood, a scalpel on the floor with a broken plate and knives.

Rachel, a foot from Linda, froze again.

I can't. "I can't. It'll get us."

"It's too much," Linda said, and Rachel wasn't sure if it was directed at her.

Linda needed help. Rachel had seen blood a hundred times, and she hadn't been taken. Years ago, she came close, so close Death tasted her. But she lived. Survived. And, for now, she had Linda and had no intention of losing her.

You have a murderer on your side. What does that make you? And what about Davey—

Fuck Davey. Rachel had killed the man who was like a father to her for a stranger she'd never see again. So, did she deserve to die?

"Let me into your work room," Rachel said over the roar of snow piling on the roof.

Linda blinked, finally looking at Rachel. "It's unlocked. We—I—we, it's not . . ."

"I've been in there before, and it's not like there'll be a body on the table, right?"

I've already seen someone die today. I saw it the moment I met you. "I need to kill them," Linda said, as if that answered what Rachel asked.

"And if they kill you?"

Linda's expression was both affectionate and terrible. "You sound just like him. I do this because it's right."

"Is leaving me alone forever right?"

"If I don't do something, you might be next."

"I'm good at running. Stop worrying about me right now."

"You know I can't."

Rachel's voice rose. "Again, like I said—and if they kill *you*?"

Linda unsmiled, the corners of her mouth raising without any other part of her brightening. "No one can kill me."

Often, Linda's invincibility made Rachel feel safe, made her something to aspire to as Rachel tore herself apart and rebuilt herself every day.

Now, it made heat flow from her head to her hands.

Rachel started, "I bet you said the same thing about—" Hand to her forehead, Linda said, hoarse, "Rach, please."

"You, please. I can't—I couldn't deal with it if you were suddenly gone. I can't even deal with *this*."

She watched Linda’s bleeding arm, which Linda looked at with disinterest.

“An accident,” Linda said.

The Thing-of-the-Woods will come.

Rachel helped Linda stand.

Fuck it. Let it come.

Linda broke into fresh sobs. “I’ll kill them. I’m going to kill them all.” She beat one fist on the floor. Rachel knelt in front of her, so their foreheads touched.

“I’ll kill them, Rach.”

Rachel then shifted, so she was beside Linda, head nuzzling her shoulders. “You can’t, not now. You need to rest.”

“I can’t. I can’t face the bed alone.”

“I’ll rest with you. I’ve done it before, haven’t I?”

Linda shook her head, the blue shadows under her eyes creeping into her amber irises, watering them down. “I can’t sleep.”

“Medicine?” Rachel said because she couldn’t will her mouth to move more than that.

“That won’t help.” For someone who went to medical school, Linda was pretty stubborn when it came to getting help.

Linda. Here. Who always protected her.

Who killed for her.

The best damn thing that’d happened to her. If only they’d met earlier in life, and Linda had been her protector when she was little.

Hotness surged up Rachel’s throat, but thankfully stopped before it reached her tongue.

“I—we need to bandage this,” Rachel said, pointing to Linda’s wound.

Rachel retrieved rubbing alcohol and bandage wraps, the smell of lemon cleaner sticking to her hair. Linda held her hand out and watched Rachel clean and bind the wound.

“He taught you well,” Linda said. Mama taught her first.

“Mom,” Rachel said, voice high-pitched, “please don’t hurt yourself.” “I know, I know, I’m sorry.” Linda leaned into Rachel, touching her cheek with the injured hand. The blood spread against the white, warming Rachel’s cheek. They stayed like that for a while till they stood, and Linda went to bed.

Rachel swept up the broken plate. When she finished and went to the bathroom and tried to scrub Linda’s blood off, no matter what, she smelled it and felt the hotness, swore she saw the outline and no matter what she did, no matter how hot the sink water ran, she kept smudging it deeper into her skin.

After she changed into a nightgown and entered the master bedroom, which felt alien and unwelcome, Linda watched her, flat on her back, eyelids swollen.

“You burned your fingers,” Linda said.

Rachel eased into bed. Into Marcus’ spot. “It’s fine.”

They didn’t sleep for hours, but they didn’t talk much either. They existed in the same space as mother and daughter, partners in crime, strangers.

Linda started, “I’ll . . .” She closed her mouth, and her eyes were foggy.

“Mom.”

“I’ll . . . I’ll . . .”

“Mom?”

Linda rolled her wedding ring around her finger. “He died alone, and now we’re burying him like a—I’ll—”

Rachel didn’t need to hear the words: I’ll kill them, kill them, kill them.

“Why don’t we go to . . . is there anything happening in town?” Linda rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, eyelashes sticking to her knuckles. “A barbecue at the church. I heard about it when Ma—when he and I were going out for supplies.”

“Let’s go to that, then. If we’re up to it.” They weren’t up for anything, but if she stayed her in the coming days, she would implode.

Linda didn’t reply with words. Her head bobbed. Rachel looked where Linda did, the rain-stained ceiling. The brown splotch expanded and swelled, grew yellow glowing growths like eyes.

It felt wrong to speak casually while Marcus rested in the ground, but if she didn’t speak like everything was normal, if she didn’t drag Linda from the abyss . . .

Linda said, “You know how I feel about Bible thumpers, hon.”

Homie yowled in the other room, as if in mourning.

They would go on, never forgetting Marcus. Her guilt—life would replace the bad past. She had learned how life went. That breakneck pace, indeed, feeling like it’d break her neck when she wanted everything to stop. Not even get better, just stop.

It never stopped.

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13

RACHEL DREAMED SHE was at the creek with a white girl who had wavy hair the color of wheat and skipped rocks on the water, her eyes devil-blue.

“Why are you here?” Rachel asked.

“I’m visiting.”

“Partying, you mean.”

“Sorry.”

Rachel kissed her, and for the first time since before the rape, she felt the slightest not-too-unpleasant pang between her legs, that odd thing when she was in bed, at the age of eleven, and would check herself to find this clear slickness in her, like an alien saliva. And she had been frightened and disgusted by her body, especially when she learned what her body was preparing to do. She would bleed, as she always bled.

(Linda and Marcus freed her.)

The girl tasted like wild strawberries with a distinct, coppery tang. When Rachel was in fourth grade and kissed a girl on the bus on a dare, and all the kids, like good Christian kids, went ewww, and the teacher lectured her on godly behavior.

“You don’t want to go to the bad place, do you?” Ms. Little said. Rachel had blinked. “If I can’t kiss in Heaven, isn’t that the bad place?”

Ms. Little was unamused, her lips like an errant black mark on a whiteboard; she even smelled of xylene and diesel fuel alongside her cherry lotion. Mama, God bless, had been furious at Ms. Little when she received the call.

The girl’s mouth became hot, and when Rachel pulled away, blood dribbled down their chins. In the curve of the other girl’s throat, orbs of

light glowed from inside, flickering, and her eyes grew and blackened. In the distance, an echoing roar.

When Rachel woke up, a wetness between her legs, she didn’t know where she was, forgot that Marcus was dead.

Startling, she looked to the side and saw Linda, back to her. She stared, waiting to see if she moved, and sure enough, Linda’s body rose and fell.

Her heart fell when reality came back like a migraine, followed by an actual migraine. Linda’s words echoed in her head: I’ll kill them all.

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The little brick Baptist church was nice-looking, as far as brick Baptist churches went. It was across from a closed down general store, which read NO TRESPASSING.

Linda told her it had been condemned and shut down since she had arrived here years ago.

They were both in black, and Rachel had thought black would make Linda look harsher, sharper like the scritch-scritch of perfecting a knife's point. Instead, she looked weak.

The dark clothes matched the bags under her eyes, made her look like she wasn't in her full power. It made her smaller, and Rachel thought about how black would hide all their stains: tears, blood, everything but red clay.

At one of the stone benches, a woman sat with a laughing baby, blonde, curly-haired, balanced on her knee and dressed in a pink, lamb-stippled coverall. Rachel hadn't really remembered babies existed, not since . . .

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But there was the baby. Happy, pretty, white. Able to rest easy as she grew. Able to live. Rachel's stomach twisted.

Her mood dampened more than usual, only partially taking her mind off the migraine she had nursed, unsuccessfully, with six ibuprofen that threatened to make her belly riot; she had eaten nothing but salted crackers in the morning.

Linda was saying something beside her. There was a waiting line at the cheap, white, plastic food tables. Rachel needed sleep, needed to go back to the cabin and roll the blankets around her.

She took a step toward an empty picnic table, and Linda sat down.

"Gonna stretch my legs," Rachel said.

Linda looked at her, eyelids still swollen in a way that made her look like something from a dream, someone lost in a different world. "Okay, hon."

Rachel turned around, took a few steps forward, and her stomach turned to ice.

A younger and older woman; Rachel focused on the younger one. Recognizing the dark hair she had briefly admired before, black as a winter midnight—

Fuckgodfuckingdamnit.

Rachel tugged on Linda's sleeve. "Hey, actually, let's sit over there."

"In the shade? If you want," Linda said, not budging an inch, "but I'd really love to sit in the sun, if you don't mind."

"Hey, some old lady was talking about how they're going to be doing a reading session for children at the library later today. You said you like doing that, don't you? We could go chill at the library now." She imagined standing awkwardly as Linda read to the kids; Marcus would've also waited by the side, hands on his elbows.

Linda ruffled her hair. "It's sweet of you to think of me, but I'd rather not bore you. And I bet you're hungry. We—I can't remember the last time we've eaten. We never did eat what we cooked yesterday."

They pored over their options over at the other tables. Burger buns. Barbecued pork. Potato salad. Cole slaw. Cornbread. Macaroni. Bacon.

Rachel said, “I’ll have a ticket for five o’clock, Heart Attack Central Station.”

Linda wrinkled her nose. “So much—bacon. They serve bacon with everything, even barbecued pork. How very redundant.”

“We eat peop—” An old lady in a polka-dotted yellow dress and wasp-red jacket toddled by. Too many people. “Peas. We eat a lot of peas. I don’t think we can judge how anyone eats.”

Standing, they moved a little down the incline, away from the food tables. “And why not? Meat is meat, and maybe whoever prepared this meal should think about how more meats exist than pig.”

A gravelly old woman’s voice came from the side. “Honey, you shouldn’t say such things. It’s such a beautiful day. There’s no need to be so cross.”

“My husband died less than twenty-four hours ago,” Linda said.

“Oh, dearie, I’m so terribly sor—” “Yes, I’m sure.”

When they were somewhat isolated, Rachel said lowly, “What we eat tastes like bacon.”

“I suppose you’re right, but it’s—different. Gamey, a cross between pig and veal. And what you add to it—it’s two separate things. You treat them differently.”

An old man said from behind, “Are you talking about those chemicals the government puts in our food to—”

Linda glanced behind her and stared. He shrank back, and though Linda’s hair covered her expression, Rachel had a pretty good idea what the old guy saw.

Lightly, Linda continued, “Anyhow, about the—I never had any pork in the house when I was young, so to see it everywhere is . . . odd.”

Rachel was going to throw up, and thankfully, with a sigh and kiss to Rachel’s temple, Linda went over to a table right under a decrepit oak.

Go with her. Run. You can’t—she can’t see me.

Looking back, Rachel tried not to stare where she was staring, which only made her stare more. Two people, just chatting, but the younger one was frowning, her arms crossed.

No.

It couldn’t be.

A trick of the light, a trick of her mind.

Davey couldn’t be here. Surely she’d be a hundred miles away by now, at least.

Looking away from the elderly woman, Davey shifted, lifted her head—

And met Rachel’s eyes.

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It was April, and Rachel was fourteen. Her new parents, taking a hunting break, mulled over grocery prices, balancing different jars of mayo and bottles of spices in their palms.

The trip to Pendlewood's grocery store was a mistake. No doubt about it. The pickup truck was the kind with a console that could be put up to make a third available seat, and she had sat to the very right, leaning hard against the window with Linda beside her and Marcus at the wheel. She had to remember to breathe in the small space, to ignore the spider creeping by her feet.

Yep. The trip was a mistake. But then again, Rachel saw most days as a mistake. That morning, only Marcus was supposed to leave, as he did most of the actual shopping and cooking while Linda told him what to get, but Linda argued that it did no good to keep a young girl cooped up. A Young Girl. All Marcus called her was The Girl.

And The Girl just wanted to sleep. It was as if, somehow, if she had remained

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ignorant of what was to come, everything that followed would've gone away. Would've stopped.

She had spent the last weeks with almost arbitrary days where food settled wrong in her stomach, and she ended up with her cheek pressed against the toilet bowl. Her scalp itched, and that strange, metallic taste wouldn't leave her tongue no matter how much mouthwash she used.

"What's wrong with me?" she had said groggily to Linda, who had pulled her hair back in an expert way that avoided touching her skin. It felt good to be doted on; it was like she was special for once in her life. Even the teasing was welcome, though Rachel never said so. Linda had a habit of just appearing wherever, and saying, "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump!" or "Oh dear, you're so jumpy, like a rabbit in the headlights." And Rachel would internally snipe back, *It's deer, deer in the headlights.*

Offering a damp, hot washcloth, which Rachel accepted without a word, Linda said, "It could be many things. Stress, well—stress is the most definite thing. Everything else requires a sort of confirmation, and I . . ."

Rachel wiped her mouth, eyes on the too-white porcelain, and mumbled, "No, no tests."

Quietly, Linda said, "Not all tests are invasive, and if it helps . . ."

"This one would have to be."

"I..."

"No."

Every part of Rachel wanted to give in, wanted stability and certainty. To let Linda and Marcus in, to stop this dance of allowing certain liberties, especially with Linda, and then pulling away. She caught the glances and wrung hands, the tightening of Linda's mouth. It wasn't enough, Rachel knew. She wasn't giving enough, but Linda was too considerate to pry as much as she gently prodded and insinuated.

She wants a daughter, and I can only give her a mess. As if she should feel bad when Linda and Marcus didn't seem to care that they killed people.

Her stomach hurt all over again. Out of everyone, cannibalistic serial killers felt like a low bar in terms of the sort of people to impress. But Linda and Marcus didn't *feel* like low bars. In school, one of her history teachers had casually mentioned Christian Crusaders eating defeated Muslims as a

fear tactic. The Victorians took the bodies of Egyptian mummies and ate their ashes, put them in tea. Bodies disrespected, violated, erased from existence. Entire civilizations eaten away by history. Linda and Marcus were only returning violence after hundreds of years; if anything, it was defensive.

Rachel could give in, should give in. Even more than she had. She was keeping pieces from them, and the more Linda pushed, Rachel didn't so much as push back anymore, but shut down. In the curves of Linda's eyes lurked need and disappointment. Rachel had accepted the cannibalism and murder. She should accept love. In time.

In the end, her anger, hot in her throat, made her decide that, yeah, maybe her brothers deserved to die. Maybe a lot of people did. So long as she was cared for, what else her guardians did wasn't important.

Her foster brothers had abused her, and back in Atlanta, they might've been forced to apologize. Maybe write some letters, some community work. Nothing to cause a ruckus. After all, it's not like Rachel had been sober and innocent, the social worker would say. Her brothers would give her knowing looks like the boys who groped her after class or the teacher who peered down her shirt and lingered his hand too long on her back. Life would continue, and if she made a fuss, made anyone remember and cough into their hand awkwardly, she'd be the one digging up a corpse with red clay all over when she should be smiling and folding her hands.

Because in the South, you were polite. Especially if you were a girl. If you questioned someone's ideas on religion or politics, you were the rude one. Especially if you were A Minority who dared bring up lynchings, or slavery, since that happened So Long Ago, and besides, black people get their own month now, so what's the big deal?

Secrets were as Southern as jam pots and peach cobbler. If you were sick, raped, or suffering, you kept that to yourself. You drank your sweet tea, split open those boiled peanuts, and kept the peace. Not like it was that much different anywhere else, probably, and that was the sad thing.

And she would've needed to forget about having a home. Nobody wanted a troublemaker, especially spoiled goods. That was why many people avoided fostering children or adopting; they wanted someone who was untouched and pliant.

Rachel could be that here. She could accept more, since she had already accepted what others would run away from. Back in the bathroom, she had laughed, and Linda's forehead wrinkled as she helped her up, but like most of everything else, that became another silence between them, a punctuation in a long string of blank space. It burgeoned in her, round and gray. A queasy thrill, the power of a secret only for her. Only caged by her, only released into the woods by her.

But she needed to know for sure because it'd propel her to act after months of inaction.

In the store, Linda scanned cans of green beans, straightening them all out on the shelf and checking their prices and amounts while performing silent arithmetic. "Do you think she has a cold?"

Marcus frowned. "I don't know if the girl does or not."

The girl was standing right here. Always the pawn, the object of disgust or affection to show off how nice adults were. If people felt anything at all about her. Her. The girl. Did Marcus think she was allergic to him saying her name?

Linda started, "Okay, I know I've been neglecting this, so let's go look at the menstrual products." She said it. Out loud. With other people around. A dude who looked about eighty, skinny Santa in camo who kept looking between the three of them and the front of the store. Another woman who looked like she had three kids, went to church every Sunday, maybe Wednesday, and complained about women who wore any makeup that wasn't natural-looking.

Rachel declared, "I need to go to the bathroom."

A question in Linda's voice. "All right, dear. Go ahead. We still need to look at the menstrual—"

"Just pick for me."

"You—I don't know what you pref . . ."

"You have a vagina, don't you? Follow your heart." They were getting looks.

Rachel expected to be followed, but as she headed toward the back where she supposed the bathroom would be, Linda and Marcus whispered about something that could've been as dire as murder or as mundane as calories.

It never occurred to them that Rachel might choose this instance to escape, not that Rachel's choices had counted so far. She lived with them, but still felt the same, still viewed the world like a rabbit always running in the night. Maybe Linda and Marcus didn't care, deep down. She had been a hassle, even in silence. Always sulking, never smiling like all the teachers told her to because she was so much prettier when she smiled. Linda wanted a child, but instead she got a traumatized, distrusting teenager who stayed because any other options were more unsavory.

Alone, Rachel scuffled down an aisle with tiny boxes and bottles. Looking down the store. Next aisle, the freezers, which had broken. Yellow markers around the aisle like a crime scene. Roaches scurried in the soupy pinks and browns puddles on the tiles, lapping at them fervently like a pack of coyotes hovering over the liquid guts of desert cattle.

Rachel swallowed back the rising sickness in her throat, hairline prickling with heat. Another aisle, her heart beat faster. Uneasily checking for any cameras attached to the ceiling, Rachel pocketed a small, rectangular box away in her dress and went inside the bathroom. Waited by the door. Nothing. Okay, she was good.

Once she was in a stall and the door swung shut, she pulled down her panties and sat. She couldn't take forever, but her nails were chewed to the bone, and she struggled to open the box. After what felt like an hour, she got the glossy white flaps open, the adhesive making a soft scraping sound, loud—too loud, the dead flies in the fluorescent ceiling, looking too fancy for this store, probably heard her.

She took out the stick and put it under her, waiting, straining.

But she wouldn't, couldn't pee. She had drunk a bunch of coffee, so much Linda joked she'd start bouncing off the walls, and she couldn't pee. Great. Real great. She was doomed. Would be found out.

She waited, kept pushing, thought she'd explode.

Eventually, she peed on the stick, and after the trickling stopped and the air grew hot and sticky, Rachel covered her mouth with her free hand, and looked.

Six minutes later, she rejoined Linda and Marcus with shadowed eyes, half-expecting a store worker to track her down.

Linda beamed, hand hovering as if to brush the hair from Rachel's eyes, but deciding against it. "There you are. Did it all go well?"

"Yeah, sure." Rachel didn't meet her eyes. "My bladder emptied, anyway."

"You look—you took a while."

Rachel shrugged.

The woman at the cash register was tight-lipped as she clacked the cash register keys. As if she saw sin with her pale eyes that reminded Rachel of her second-grade teacher's pet chameleon always staring at the back of her head. Rachel squeezed her eyes shut.

With no promise of being heard, she was thinking, praying, wishing bandages and band aids could fix her now. She thought of Mama, Papa, God. Begged for them.

Help me.

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14

“WELL, THIS IS awkward,” Davey said lowly.

Rachel exhaled. “No kidding.”

“Didn’t think I’d see you. I followed the scowls.” Davey made a show to look around and meet some folks in the eye. “Oh wait, those were for me.” A pause. Maybe she forgot her near-dea— “Hey, that your dad who . . . ?”

“Yeah.”

“Christ.” They stared. Davey’s mouth hung open. “And he really . . .”

“Yep,” Rachel replied. It was like working on the Sabbath, speaking about Marcus this way.

“Shit. Sorry, I . . . shit.”

Rachel shrugged, not because it was no big deal, but because it was all her body could do without falling apart. “He tried to kill you.”

“Yeah, thanks for saving me. Does that happen often?” Davey’s face fell, and she swallowed. Her eyebrows said more than any tears ever could. “Shit, look at me joking around here, and we haven’t even found Noah yet.”

We?

God. We.

This woman had just entered her life and thought she controlled everything.

Who was in control? Because it sure as hell wasn’t Rachel.

What had she gotten herself—*God, I’m a monster, I helped kill him*—into? There was no “Rachel and Davey.” There had been “Rachel, Linda, and Marcus,” which was now “Rachel and Linda.”

And Linda could never find out what she'd done.

"Did you call the police?" Davey asked, quiet.

Rachel rubbed her neck. "Yeah, I tried, but then I remembered we don't have phones."

Davey blinked, giving her a long look, and Rachel went hot. "Well, I went to the station. Again. And . . ."

"Right," Rachel replied, hands in her jacket. "No luck?"

"Nope. They think it's some joke. They *laugh*. And his mom's birthday is in a week. Wouldn't want . . ." Either Davey trailed off, or Rachel didn't hear the rest of the sentence with the thunder between her ears.

"Laugh? But . . ." An elderly white man scuttled past, and Rachel reflexively hunched, lowering her voice. "That makes no sense. Maybe if he were . . ." Like them. "He's white, a white dude. If they'd care about anybody going missing, it'd be him."

Davey crossed her arms. "You'd think."

Rachel looked behind her. Linda was gone.

Where—God, I need to—

"Hey, listen," Rachel said, "I really want to help . . ." Did she?

Davey observed the crowd. Too many people. "If someone took him . . ." A squinting old lady looked at them through the slits between the crinkly circles of her doughy skin. As she scuttled on, Davey spoke lower. "I bet they're here chomping on some mac and cheese. I'm not Sherlock Holmes, but that lady over there looks kinda shady, that one putting her teeth in."

The lady was, indeed, putting her teeth in. "You . . . I mean, I don't want to be a downer, but you think he's still al—okay?"

"People disappear and turn up all the time. Sometimes they see things. Weird creatures, skull-deer or whatever, shadow tricks, but they always come back fine. There are weirdos, like Old Man Howler going around and barking in the woods and stealing everyone's newspapers. But everything is always okay. That's why people like the woods—it's eerie, but peaceful. Everything's fine. Too many Confederate flags, but fine."

When they first met, Rachel had thought Davey was cool, and now she thought, *Oh no, she's stupid.*

No, not stupid. She had no clue how deep in the creek she was. The woods were so odd that rather than being on high alert, Davey shrugged off everything saying she should run. She was dedicated to finding someone who was already dead and packed in the freezer. Living in a cozy mystery with a happy ending.

"You saw me kill my dad." Her throat swelled. Even when Marcus' death lurked everywhere in her mind, it was so present she had forgotten the details—his fall, his blood. The moment he rattled with death. It was so present, like the Thing-of-the-Woods, like the creek fairies, that she forgot it was real. Like kept meat, it had been tucked away by her brain, which arranged and rearranged her traumas, trying to stuff them in the back of the shelf to be forgotten.

Davey looked at her, and she was different. "You think I never thought you were responsible for Noah's disappearance. Look me in the eyes and tell me the truth."

The rabbit was trying to claw out. That wouldn't go over well. Most of the people here probably had heart conditions. Last thing they needed to see was a furry chestburster hanging out of Rachel like a furry tongue. "I didn't do anything to him. I've never hurt anybody, besides my dad, and that was an accident." It wasn't a lie. She didn't hold the knife. She didn't cut Noah's throat.

Oh God, where had Linda gone? She'd lost track of her.

Davey's eyes softened, her knuckles brushing Rachel in all the very-bad-no-good-kinda-nice ways. "I know. You saved my life. If you wanted me dead, you would've let me die, did nothing. And when you hurt your dad, it was to protect someone else."

"Rach, who is this?" Linda chimed.

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After the trip to the grocery store, Rachel decided to die.

It was a pragmatic decision; her circumstances overreached her means. It was like balancing out a scale, and life was too heavy. Something had to make everything equal again. And it's not like her coping skills would get better; it seemed like she was only getting worse.

Pragmatic, a hundred-dollar word. Right. The sort she heard in those game shows she would watch with Mama and Papa when they all had time to themselves and Papa gently edged Rachel away from a pillow where she worked hard to pull all the stuffing out and, when she was two, eat it.

Just think what they'd say if they saw what she ate now. *I only ate some. Not like Linda and Marcus kill* that *many people.*

Pragmatic. The only way.

She couldn't climb a mountain with one boot and a broken rope, and she couldn't live knowing she'd doom a child to having a mess of a mother. A mother whose body still hadn't fully developed. A mother who wasn't ready to have a kid while she lived with two serial killers and was, quite honestly, a wreck. As winter had grown colder a few months ago, the cabin pipes threatening to burst if they didn't turn the water off at night. Rachel had layered herself in the lacy, too-big dresses Linda bought for her at a small thrift store in town. Spring was supposed to be here, but it was cold, so her layers weren't suspicious yet. They hung off her barely developed frame like cobwebs. Even with her stretch marks and budding curves, she had years to go before she fully matured.

Didn't matter now.

At least when she died, she wouldn't need to save shitting till morning, after the pipes were good with no leaks in sight.

I can't wait. Can't take it. Need to go. Can't can't can't.

She imagined the pipes swelling with ice, straining. Imagined her own body swelling and splitting. Rested her hands on her stomach, thought of all the times Linda showed concern and gave her stuff to lessen the nausea. Holding back her hair as she threw up.

That evening, looking for all avenues to kill herself, Rachel chose to let nature do her in. It felt like the most poetic way to go. Less blood.

She went to leave the cabin, the front door mocking her, the gate between life and death.

“You’re up,” Marcus said, sitting on the couch under a battlefield of yarn, long and shiny hooked needles in his hands.

She froze, like she’d been discovered doing something sinful. Right, existing. Taking note of the permanent furrow in his brow, Rachel said, “Sorry to bother you.” She rubbed the soles of her slippers together.

“You aren’t bothering me. I’m generally bothered.” “Oh.”

She didn't want to press her luck and ask him why.

Watching him was like watching fish through lightly iced-over water. She thought she could discern what he’d do. He would keep a tight lip and observe.

Rachel frowned. “You’re . . .” *You still exist.*

“Crocheting,” he answered. She knew what that was. Knitting, but it sounded fancier.

She scratched her neck and looked at the swirly green rug in front of her. “Oh, my m . . .” Her mama did that. She bit her tongue. “I didn’t know canni—man, *men* knew how to do that.”

He paused, like she’d broken him. She froze too, waiting for him to chide her over something that was, on second thought, not the best thing to say. Stupid, it was stupid, and he’d tell her as much because she deserved it.

“It’s very relaxing.” He never seemed that excited in the first place, but Rachel didn’t say as much. “Do you need something?”

She was bothering him. Great. Her stomach cramped. “Oh, God, no, sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You’re not bothering me.” As he spoke to her, his eyes didn’t leave the yarn, the red, pink, and purple diamonds. She felt queasy because they reminded her of guts, and she pondered if someone stretched out a human’s organs and put them all next to each other, how long that’d be. If one could make a blanket out of human guts. “You looked like you had a question.”

“Oh. I don’t.” Part of her wanted to blurt out her plan, make him comfort her or give her some way out. Rachel pointed to the half-done blanket. “That’s real pretty.” She never had a favorite color, since they all looked all right to her, but the pink and purple looked good together and reminded her of her old childhood room.

“Do you want it?”

Her eyes hurt. In a day, less, she’d be dead. She had no use for pretty things. Rachel scratched the back of her neck. “I mean, not if you’re making it for someone else . . .”

“Linda doesn’t need the twelve I’ve made her. She’s the one who gets hot in the middle of the night.”

“Menopause, right?” Rachel rubbed her belly. Menopause didn’t sound so bad.

His brow furrowed. “How do you know what that is?”

She forced herself not to pout. “I’m not dumb. My mom was a nurse. I read stuff.”

Steaming past what she said, he replied, “It’s just how she is. I’ve always been on the colder side of things.” Marcus stared at Rachel’s hand. “Are you experiencing pain?”

“I’m fine.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.” He added, softer, “But if you don’t want to speak about it, you don’t have to.”

She blinked. “I’m hurting a little.”

“There are pain medications in the bathroom cabinet.”

He stood and went to the kitchen, where a few dishes sat in the sink. “You look a bit froggish,” Marcus said as he cleaned something in the soapy water, and Rachel noticed what he was holding: a scalpel. Her stomach churned.

“Froggish?” she asked.

“Green around the gills. Sick. Nevermind. It’s something my aunt would say.”

“Where’s . . .” It seemed weird to call Linda, an adult, by her name. If it didn’t have a period somewhere, Mr. or Ms., it wasn’t adult enough. “Where is she?”

“Outside.”

Shit. “Okay.”

Looking at her from that space between them, Marcus opened his mouth, but she went out before she heard anything. Linda sat on the ground, legs crossed, eyes closed. She opened them when Rachel shut the front door.

Not even two seconds— “How are you feeling? It’s getting cold.” Linda put her hands on her arms and brred.

They were freaks, and Rachel should hitchhike to town and find a way to get as far away from them as she could. She didn’t know what would happen to her then, though, and that was scarier. Better to be with the murderers than alone. That was, until she decided to end it all. Better to be in Heaven.

“I’m okay.” The forest welcomed her, frosty-clear and dew-dusted. “The fireplace is almost empty. I could go get some wood. My body’s all hurting from not moving.”

“It’s almost dark, dear. We can go later. The fireplace can wait.” “I can get some. I know there’s probably some not too far away.” The woods would take care of her. Finally, someone would.

Haven’t they? *Haven’t they fed you . . . stuff? Haven’t they cleaned you up after your messes?*

Linda straightened her legs. “You’re sick, honey. I can do it, if it means that much to you.”

“It won’t take long, I promise! Please. I need to do something. Besides going to the store, I’ve been cooped up all day. All week. All—it made me realize I can’t just stay in the same place and heal.”

“You’re right, but right now, you’re ill.” Ill, sick, ruined. “While weather won’t make you sick, it certainly won’t help. You need rest.”

Exactly.

“Please?” Rachel asked in a tiny voice. “Just this one time?”

Linda’s face drew tight, deep lines forming under her eyes and around her mouth. Linda stood, dusting stunted grass off her skirt. Rachel waited for her to ask for an elaboration. Instead, the woman reached out, but stopped herself, saying, “If you insist. Stay safe, and don’t take too long.”

“O—”

“But you need to dress in something besides a gown, especially when it’s getting dark. Perhaps I should go with you?”

“Trust me, I won’t be gone that long. And I doubt the trees will mind.”

“Are you sure you’re all right going out alone? Here,” Linda said, taking off her jacket, “have—”

Linda was trying to take care of her, but it wasn’t enough. She’d leave, like everyone, especially when she learned Rachel was not only spoiled goods but also pregnant goods.

Without thinking, and not accepting the jacket, Rachel ran to Linda and hugged her. Linda made an “oof, oh,” but after a couple of awkward seconds, she patted Rachel’s back, letting her hand rest there for a second. Rachel inhaled the scent of Linda’s lotion, enjoyed the last warmness she’d feel.

When Rachel jerked away, Linda’s eyebrows pinched together as her hands fell to her sides.

Rachel kept backing away, and Linda lowered her gaze. As much as Rachel hated disappointing people, this was a new sort of power, being able to tell others when they could touch her. All too often, when she pulled away from an adult who wanted to hug her, she was scolded or laughed at, any protests seen as pigheadedness.

It’s time for me to die, Rachel needed to say. Instead: “See you later.”

Linda pursed her lips, nodding as Rachel went to leave. “All right. Come back safely.” She looked from the jacket to Rachel, eyes bothered. *She knows something’s up, but she trusts me*. Rachel was her weakness. “But—you need this. I can negotiate only so far. You’ll freeze to death in a nightgown.”

“Fine,” Rachel said, taking the jacket and pulling it over herself.

“If you aren’t comfortable with me . . .” Linda vaguely gestured vertically over her own dress—the zipper, right. “You really don’t need to do this. Marcus and I can find wood tomorrow. Neither of us could bear if you hurt yourself out there.”

Ouch.

“I need some fresh air. I can’t just be indoors all the time with— people.”

To her surprise, Linda graced her with a fond smile. Somehow, it was the saddest thing she’d seen, one of the last sights she’d see. “You sound like Marcus. He’s always enjoyed the quiet more than me—at least, it doesn’t hurt to go into town occasionally. How did you like that, by the way?”

It sucked. “It was okay. Fresh air.” *I’ll never get to killing myself at this rate*. Was this why so many others postponed their own deaths, because people wouldn’t shut up?

She couldn’t live in a world that had moved on from her tragedy, that saw what’d happened as a passing blip, a little stumble where she scraped her knees. When, in reality, she mourned herself, because she had died but kept living, and no one mourned with her. She couldn’t live through this, couldn’t live without . . .

Maybe, at this rate, madness could be her survival, but she was tired of falling, of waiting to hit the bottom only to slip down again before she could start climbing.

“Be back safely,” Linda said. “It feels like it’ll snow soon.” It was April. It wouldn’t snow. “And with it getting dark . . . and if you decide I could come with you, I could . . .”

“Right,” Rachel replied, waving. “Bye.”

Linda waved. “Bye . . . Rach.”

Rachel went across the clearing and into the trees. When Linda was out of sight, she let the jacket fall to the ground, unsettling the dead leaves.

Once Rachel walked far enough into the forest, she settled on the ground. It was cold and hard against her palms, and she even felt it through her clothes, soaking through her dress. She rested with her back to the sky, and the leaves crunched satisfyingly beneath her. The dense nook engulfed her as shadows multiplied around her like fiddlebacks in rotting oak logs. The trees twisted into skinny ghosts, grimacing fairies staring at Rachel with green-gold judgment, fingers snaking across the darkness, rooting her there.

They must be hurting too.

How long would this take? Didn’t matter. She could handle a little cold; she could handle dying.

She should’ve left a note. Something for the odd people who had treated her so well. The rabbit died. Thanks for the food. Something.

But it was nice here, forgetting about the weight in her heart. Gliding, not rooted by shame. In the mist of almost-sleep, Rachel swept over small puddles onto red earth. This was what she was meant to do all along. She’d been unwanted and burdensome since Mama and Papa died, and she was saving herself and others from suffering. She was doing what her brothers should’ve done.

So easy. Much easier doing this than the lead-up to it. Just a few seconds of falling. Falling, wandering, sleeping. Then, all the bad memories would go away. Surely, God understood, though He was the one who did this to her. Nobody would miss her, especially all those who abandoned her. Because they hated her, the only constant in her life.

A howl lashed through the woods. Looking down, she found her feet—where had her shoes gone? She was exposedgrossnaked—mired in gummy water. It was then she saw the wildlife in there with her, gawking with faces of exposed bone. She should’ve panicked, but no, she wasn’t in the water. In her body, she was lying on the forest floor, waiting to die. This wasn’t even painful, just a short sight to endure before her final rest. Not scary, only a little sad to see others as trapped as her, as monstrous as her. She couldn’t dwell on that. She needed to go.

To her final rest.

Wherever that would be.

If the woods didn’t claim her first.

If whatever had left these skull things in the black water didn’t eat her.

When she tried to rise, her soul caught in the branches, fell into the water, clay, and mud.

The cold seeped into her, and as she willed herself to wake up out of this trance, two sets of glowing, green eyes hung in the air, blackness pooling across the rain-fattened creek. The water dipped around her, and then moved to the awful lights like evening water pooling around the sun. She scrambled back, opened her mouth—

And found herself sitting in a copse of thick-trunked oaks forming a crown around a fluttering grove. White pebbles scattered in a circle like little animal skulls, moving with a wind she didn’t feel, and when she brushed a tree with a palm, she realized that, oh, it had eyes.

Thousands of lightning bugs thrummed in the blue-black, lulling her into a lurid trance as they bowed and created their own canopy, a new Heaven. Plucking them out of the air, she ate them, one by one. She sucked on the sweet yellows and oranges that shimmered like crystals on their backs.

Squelching. Footsteps.

The lights died. Whoever was coming, their noises echoed too close. The lightning bugs dimmed, froze. When she reached a finger out, she pressed into one wing, and the webbed membrane yielded like paper.

She has to be close.

Are you sure she didn’t go into the road?

No, I saw her go out for wood. The jacket . . .

She could be anywhere.

There’s nowhere in these woods we don’t know.

No, no, she’ll have to give answers, find her voice, and release her sad little, flitting thoughts. Mutter, squeak. Scream. She was so close to a shining world. She was too close to live now.

What would they do to her when they found her? There was no reason for them to cry. They saw dead bodies before, and it wasn’t as if there was much to mourn.

Something licked the slits between her fingers.

The amber fire of the bugs—Linda’s eyes, concerned, reaching across the space.

A falling sensation from the pit of her stomach sucked her back to the cold, wet ground. Her left eye flickered open, and something—an ant—crawled on her thumb. Linda wasn’t there.

Don’t wake up. You’re doing everyone a favor.

It was too late. Her eyes were open, and she lowered her knuckle by a leaf, so the ant crawled away.

She no longer heard Linda and Marcus, no feet, no nothing.

She closed her eyes again, searching for the light that made some dark part of her squirm and thrive.

You can't give up like this. She wanted to live, really. Just not in this world. This startling new reality that became less startling with each passing day. She didn't so much survive the days as accept them. It was tiring.

But what if in a month, a year, in five, she grew used to this world? *I can't get used to it. That'd make me a monster.*

She was already treating herself like a monster, though.

She opened her eyes, closed them again.

The world went black, flickered, but grass tickled her cheek, mocking her.

She was back.

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15

BACK, AND FREEZING.

She blinked, icy dots melting on her eyelids. It was snowing, and she was soaking wet. Holy fuckballs, something was licking her fingers. A nip, ow, something was eating her, it—

“Mrow?” A face of fur all over her knuckles.

It was the cat, Homie. Made sense. She once read cats would eat people when they died.

“Getting a head start?” she muttered. It hurt to speak.

“Mrahw,” Homie replied.

“Sorry to disappoint.” She sighed, patting the chilly, hard ground beside her. “Come on.”

Homie looked to the side. The cat was purring, and she wondered if he saw what she did, if he felt it down to where his hair needled into his skin.

“Come on, buddy, don’t . . .” He ran off. “. . . leave me here.”

When Rachel rose to her feet with both arms and a new strength in her knees, her belly fluttered. She had sworn she heard footsteps, voices, felt the earth gently vibrate, its blood thrumming under her palms. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe they were ghosts. She could go back and find the cabin burned to the ground from years ago, find out the past months were a vision. Find out God was good, for once. Dios que da la llaga, da la medicina.

Lights, something—in the dark—

Lights, eyes. Hundreds of lightning bugs flashing. They became, orange, yellow, red. Green. The green eyes of a thing from her dreams, a thing that if she stayed, it would find her and keep her in its toothy water. Mike.

That thing, the Thing.

It took form, wrapping the shadows and trees around it like a jagged cloak, all the lightning bugs becoming two constant lights. Following her, tickling her hair. She wanted to run, but her feet were dogwoods roots, just deep enough to keep her there. Sprouting pink between her toes.

The Thing-of-the-Woods, coming into focus with its furry head, crooked antlers, and ragged ears, opened its red mouth, white teeth gleaming, a hundred little smiles.

If she hadn't already been stripped clean, she would've peed. She wanted to scream, but more than anything, she was pissed. After trying to end her own life on her own terms, she hadn't survived this long (this much) to die by the hands—claws?—of some fucked up bear.

The forest smiled down on her, and like Alice in that colorful but silly movie, she fled to keep from being eaten. The roots snapped, and she ran. She didn't get far, her ribs hurting with the deep cold pulsing in her lungs. She dug her fingers into the crook of her arm. If she didn't, she'd go back to the lightning grove, to the creek where she waded through deer and squirrel skulls and saw the *eyes*.

Her stomach ribbitted—less of a fluttering, more like a two-second muscle spasm. She put her hand there, trying to upright the slant world, becoming cruelly white before her eyes.

Almost April, shouldn't be snowing, fuck Georgia. A shitty place full of shitty people with snow in April, the second-most lynchings in any state, and people who refused to acknowledge the second part while they complained about the first. No wonder she didn't want to have some poor kid born here.

I'm sorry.

She was tired of apologizing. Everything was always her fault, and she was sick of it. She did things, and sure, she got the blame, but then things happened to her, and it was still her fault. She was sick of blaming herself, but in a way, it gave her control to be a fuckup. Boys got to mess up all the time and still be worth something.

She blinked away snowflakes. All the trees looked the same, and when she tried to find her way back to the cabin, her sneaker slipped on mud. Her

ankles and knees spasmed, but she kept going; it wasn't anything she hadn't suffered before.

Deepening her grip on her arm, not looking down when she felt the wetness of snow or blood, Rachel carried herself back to the cabin, or hopefully the general direction of the cabin, ignoring the snapping of twigs under her slippers. She swore she could see the amber porch lights in the distance. Lights, lights.

Had she really not gone that far? It felt like she'd been walking for ages. Something else moved her body, as if two devils without names buried themselves in her feet. But it was stupid. She wasn't possessed, nothing was showing her the way as her vision blurred and briars and low branches caught on her sleeves. She was lucky.

Because, hell, what did she expect, someone to sweep in and save her? That would be just *great*, having some white rando coming in and rescuing her like it happened in movies.

Snot and tears welled up in her. She pressed her palm to her mouth. Not now. If she broke, fell, looked down, she wouldn't climb back up again. She'd think about if she were prettier, more polite, she wouldn't be in this situation. Her will would scatter like blowing on a dandelion.

She couldn't go on.

Going on, she came to a clearing, and the cabin stood, waiting. With a gasp, she pulled her palm away from her mouth, and unclamped her arm.

Why would her brothers rape her, she thought, and why would they talk to her as if she had wronged them? Had she not been pretty enough, polite enough? Should she have smiled more, so they would like her better? Rachel paced grooves into her mind about what she could've done differently.

The darkest bit of glee warmed her as she thought about them dying.

Lamps tipping over, any meager weapons falling out of their hands.

Linda and Marcus splitting their throats open.

She hoped her brothers suffered at least half of what she'd endured, as regretful as it made her. She couldn't forgive how they—they enjoyed it when all she wanted to do was have some friends. She ached wondering

how, just how they derived pleasure from her kicking and screaming and begging.

Even for her own sake, Rachel, in the sleepy, blue cold, couldn't forgive them, not now. Maybe she never would. She wanted to hurt herself for being bloodthirsty, for having this part of her, the part that was okay with what two cannibals have done. She should be in math class sucking the salt off pretzel snacks, not here.

She should be in a place that never accepted her.

Fuck that.

Rachel wiped the snot off her face with the back of her hand. Exhaling slowly, she opened the front door of the cabin. The hinges squeaked. The living room was empty and quiet. Dead quiet. For fear of rattling the calmness, she hesitated on shutting the door.

In the forest, everything teemed with the tree frogs chirping and the insects humming, but not here. The change made her dizzy. Outside, the truck was gone, no longer staring at her from the window. Not even the cat greeted her. After a minute of nothing, Rachel closed the door.

The main bedroom light was on, but nobody was inside when she peeked, heart in her throat.

She looked at her hand, saw the blood under her nails.

"No," she whispered, running to the bathroom and twisting the hot water on. "Nononono." The water burned her fingers, but she didn't care.

Her feet dragged her to her room, her head bobbing along. She flicked on the nightstand lamp, and part of the white shade was brownish where a light bulb almost burned a hole through it before she ever came here. This was the first time she noticed.

She pulled the curtains away so her room could be seen from the outside. When Linda and Marcus came back, if they were trying to find her, they could notice the light in her bedroom and investigate.

So could anything else.

Rubbing her frozen cheeks, mind numb, Rachel flopped into bed, not really noticing much except that the cabin was so, so warm. The mattress groaned beneath her, and she actually slept.

She woke up sometime with a weight by her, and she almost startled and flung her eyes open, but she smelled the strawberry lotion and knew who it was.

Linda murmured, “How could I have been so stupid?”

Marcus replied, voice a curt staccato, “You trusted her, and she took advantage of that.”

Linda’s fingers brushed Rachel’s aching ones, and the cold touch almost made Rachel flinch. It would’ve, if she hadn’t survived what she did. Her arms prickled. “I don’t see any scratches or bruises.” Linda released a long sigh, barely audible with the wind beating the cabin. The lamp clicked off.

Rachel cracked her eyes open, despite herself, not seeing much in the web of lashes. She saw shadows, and in the blue silhouettes, Marcus reached out to touch Linda’s cheek, her hand on his elbow. Rachel closed her eyes again, holding in a breath.

“You need sleep,” he said, soft. “We can question her tomorrow.” Question. Like some sort of police thing. Like—like parents after their kid came back after curfew. As if she were normal and hadn’t tried to end her life.

Great.

“I don’t need sleep,” Linda said, and Rachel imagined her looking down, half her face covered by a hand. Looking perfectly pretty, like always. “I need a drink.”

Rachel closed her eyes, and heat was in her hair, thin fingers.

Pulling, crinkling. Someone had pulled a leaf out of her hair.

Linda slid off the bed, and someone—Marcus? No, it couldn’t be—pulled the blanket at the foot of the bed up to her shoulders.

“She looks like she’s freezing,” Linda said. Another weight fell over Rachel—another blanket, maybe one Marcus made.

Eventually, Rachel fell asleep, dreaming of the crackling of leaves and eyes gleaming between the trees like haunted emeralds.

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PUSHING THE SHEETS and blankets away, Rachel sat up and stretched. The new blanket was green, brown, and tan. Camo colors. Her muscles hurt like she had a heckuva weight, like a whole mountain, slam into her. She wiped off the drool in the corner of her mouth, sweat pooling under her armpits. As she pulled the tag out of the gown collar, she blinked her tiredness away, strangely refreshed.

Her mouth—her whole face—naturally relaxed. It was like her brain was shooting out something to make her forget what happened last night. She looked down, saw the red and brown stains on her gown, and didn't care.

When she came out of her room, she was struck by how normal the scene was. Marcus cleared off the counter while Linda sat, leaning with her head down and eyes half-lidded. The smelly curtains were pushed away, allowing for the whole room to stink of the morning's vibrant reds and yellows. Rachel's best memory of her elementary school days came close to shattering her newfound bravery, when there was the sizzling of bacon, and Mama and Papa smiled at her before she went off to the bus stop; back when her mouth watered without her stomach cramping.

Rachel's hands shook. She was fourteen now, and one of those boys knocked her up when she was thirteen. Knocked her up, what a stupid expression. She got knocked up, all right, up and around and deep inside. Her birthday passed without a word because, well, these near-strangers had never asked about her birthday, and she hadn't been keen on telling them. Besides, a questionable pie wasn't Rachel's idea of an endearing birthday treat, though she'd had little luck and experience in giving and receiving presents in recent years.

Not that it mattered anymore.

She sat down across from Linda, and Linda and Marcus stared at her like she was a deer that had wandered in and asked for apple juice.

“Good morning,” Rachel said, elbows on the table, the chair molding her back. Linda gave her a wan smile, but it didn’t last.

“How did the search for firewood go?” said Linda.

With his normal bluntness, Marcus began, “We were out searching for you last night. We went along the road, started combing the forest.” Not missing a beat, he wiped the counter clean with the dirty blue cloth in his hand.

“I just got lost looking for firewood. I’m always cold at night.” Rachel’s lack of care emboldened her. “I mean, that’s why I went looking for it. Before I got lost.” Maybe when she was on the forest floor, when she ate the lightning bugs, she changed.

Marcus frowned more than usual. “You’re joking.” In any other context, his are-you-fucking-kidding arch of the brow would’ve made her laugh. “You never told us about that.”

“Yes, I did. I told her.”

“You really found nothing,” Marcus replied. “No wood. In the forest, known commonly by some as ‘the woods’.”

A cold river of snot fell from Rachel’s nose, and, bristling, she wiped it away with the sleeve of her dress. “All I found were damp sticks.”

Their stares stripped her of her skin. All she wanted was, hell, a cereal with colorful marshmallows or something, so she could at least distract herself by picking all the marshmallows out. The wood table, with all its nicks—*how many of these are from a knife?*

Rachel said, tasting another snot-river with her tongue, “I tried to kill myself.”

Linda sucked in a breath, eyes wide and glistening. Marcus paused, and then sat beside Linda. Removing his glasses and setting them on the table, he exhaled, stitched his fingers together, and rubbed the stub of his long nose with his knuckles.

“When?” Linda asked, and Rachel’s heart twisted at the squeakiness of her voice. That wasn’t right. She was supposed to be angry. With care, Rachel scrubbed her brain clean, smoothed out her heart like evening out sand on a windy beach.

“Right after I left. I don’t know the exact time.” Words clipped, Rachel continued, “After I left for firewood, I laid down in the cold. I was going to let myself die right here.”

“Why—why would you end your own life?” Linda said with a small shake of her head, warmth coursing through every word. “Nothing that’s happened has been your fault.”

“She’s hiding something,” Marcus said, voice clicking along, matter of fact.

Rachel said, “I’m right here.”

“Are you?” he asked.

“Don’t get all existential on me.” Yeah, that’s right, she knew words from studying for standardized tests. She could be fancy too. “You’re telling me you don’t have your secrets?”

Linda waved. “Marcus, enough. Rachel, listen to me. I’ve humored you. I really have. I—we, more than anyone, understand what’s happening.”

“Do you? Why, you think a degree makes you an expert on how I feel? Like you said, you cut people open. You’re not a noodle doctor. I’ve accepted you despite what you’ve done. Why can’t you accept what I say and leave it?”

Linda kneaded her forehead, lips pursed, sharply breathing through her nose. Good. Cut the fake shit. *Hate me.* “‘What we’ve done’?”

Rachel sniffed and forced her arms to stop shaking. “Kill me.”

Linda leaned back, her forehead a tangle of lines. She spread her fingers on the table, crooking them like spider legs. The yellow light stippling across the wallpaper and Linda’s hair cast her in a pre-Raphaelite glow. (Art was the only class Rachel really paid attention in, after a point. It wasn’t that she wasn’t interested in learning. It was that the teachers didn’t seem interested in teaching her.) “We aren’t going to kill you. We just want to

understand. You really don’t understand our reasons, but I can’t expect you to. I need to wait till I think you can handle it. And you could tell us if you’re—thinking about hurting yourself, and we can help, but we can’t if you don’t let us in.”

“I’m expected to give away everything, but you keep secrets to spare my feelings?”

“We don’t want to trigger you,” Linda said, measured.

Trigger. Her whole life was a trigger, a loaded gun. The smells of breakfast reminded her of home. So did the yellow glow leaking through the curtains. “I know the sad routine is getting old, but when your life has been one bad thing after another, it’s not hard for everything to stir up some shitty memory out of a thousand. You can’t help. It’s just how I feel. I’ve felt it for a while since my mama and papa died, but it’s only gotten worse, like everything else. And at the store, when I found it out . . .”

Linda’s brow creased. “‘It’?”

“I’m pregnant.” As soon as it left her mouth, it struck her—not the reality, but the fact that, huh, pregnant was a weird word. Kinda funny. An old lady word, something women in their twenties and thirties said.

Preg-nant. No, preg-nint. It rhymed with nutmeg-lint. Beg-mint. Leg-hint. Even its existence made the air swell like it carried something new. Knocked up. Bun in the oven. Eating for two. The rabbit died. What was inside her became more than an idea, more than darkness. It made her want to laugh and cry all at once.

She dared to look at Linda first, and she couldn’t tell what she was thinking, beyond the slight widening of her eyes. Marcus wasn’t even looking up, but peering at his clasped fingers.

Marcus took his eyes off his hands, but he didn’t fully meet her eyes. “How do you know?”

“I used a—uh, a pee stick in the grocery store. It tested positive.” With lethargic motions, Rachel draws a plus sign in the air.

Linda offered, rubbing her neck and not looking directly at Rachel. “It could’ve been wrong. Sometimes, especially when women want a child

badly, they have symptoms without actually being pregnant."

"It wasn't wrong." She put a hand on her stomach, and queasiness stirred there. Strange, something so common. Inside her, festering. "Why would I want to have a baby that badly? I'm only fourteen." Rachel swallowed. Those last three words made her feel little. When she looked at the adults at the table, they both looked a little guilty. "Wait, did you know?"

Linda raised one shoulder in a meager half-shrug, brows drawn and head tilted. "We couldn't know, per se."

Marcus elaborated, pressing his lips together, "We suspected because of your vomiting, and when you complained about a strange aftertaste in your mouth." He looked down, as if unsure if he should elaborate further.

Linda continued, "And the absence of your menstrual cycle. But it could have easily been trauma, and we couldn't examine you for confirmation. We also didn't want to trigger you by bringing up the subject."

There it was again, that worthless regard that somehow made Rachel warm, for what little good it did.

Rachel's stomach growled, and it hurt. She didn't want to talk about this anymore, but she needed to. It wouldn't just disappear. "What'm I gonna do?" Rubbing a space between her knuckles, she wanted to be left alone and to have someone embrace her and clutch onto her for as long as they could, till one or both of them died.

Marcus asked, "Do you want to carry it to full-term?"

"Or . . ." Rachel drawled.

"Terminate it," he said.

Linda's eyes were bright, expression contorted. "It's your choice. You should do what you believe is best." She peered at her husband. "We'll do whatever needs to be done."

Marcus nodded, face drawn. "Yes, of course."

"Right," Rachel said, echoing, "what needs to be done."

"And we'll make you as comfortable as possible," Linda said, her words a slurry in an avalanche.

Comfort. Rachel wanted to laugh. Even with clean sheets and clothes, she felt like there was a layer of dirt between her and the fabric, that sort of feeling when someone ate crunchy food in their bed.

“Rach?” Linda said, tearing her away from herself.

She stood up. “I—need to think.”

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DAVEY'S VOICE CRACKED. "Hi. You're her mom?"

Linda's smile was cool, a ghost of what it once was, full of teeth. Her shoulders were low and easy where Davey's were bunched and hard. "Yes." The first thought Rachel had was how she had no idea how, without a dentist, Linda kept her teeth white instead of coffee-stained around the edges, like Rachel's.

The second was that she and Davey, for as long as there was a "she and Davey," were so terribly screwed. There was no them, though. There was a family, fourth time's the charm. There was only Rachel and Linda. No one could be added, only taken away. If she broke that for some stranger, she'd lose the family she'd gained—again.

Rachel stood between them, switching between looking at the two women.

Davey didn't smile, just stared, unblinking. *Great. She won't expect anything.* "I'm sorry for your loss."

Linda rose a single brow, an expression Rachel attempted in the mirror many times with no luck. "Oh?"

"I just told her . . . sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Linda's smile was watery and made Rachel feel like a dead mouse Homie had sacrificed on her pillow once. "He belonged to you as much as he did me." To Davey, she said, "What's your name, dear?" Did Linda recognize her like Marcus did?

"I—uh." Rachel gave her a pointed look, one Davey thankfully caught, arching her brows. Don't do it. "Dani, ma'am." Thank God.

"Are you from here, dear? Any relatives?"

Davey swallowed, no doubt knowing how ostracized any strangers were in a small mountain town. "My grandma's from here."

Linda wouldn’t take her eyes off Davey. “Oh? What street?”

Davey flubbed. “I . . .”

“Davey, honey,” an older woman called from another table, “do you know if I left my dentures on the kitchen counter again?” She had a checkered blue dress and a dragonfly pin on the left breast pocket.

Linda said, “She got your name wrong.”

“I don’t know her,” Davey replied, shrugging. The old woman, too far away to hear the conversation, squinted beneath her Coke bottle glasses and took a step forward.

Grabbing Linda’s sleeve, Rachel stepped back, mumbling an apology when she bumped into a woman with curly dark hair that was obviously dyed and permed. “Mom, we should really go. I’m tired.” The tension in her shoulders ached.

Linda smiled at Rachel. “Oh no, please, talk to . . . your new acquaintance. We so rarely get to do these things. I didn’t mean to interrupt, or startle you. I’ll be about.” She stepped away, hands clasped.

Davey leaned in. “Is she a killer too?”

Rachel waved her hands. “Shh!”

“Oh, come on. Tell me.” They were walking closer to the church.

“Maaaybe.” They were close, too close. It was supposed to be unpleasant; it wasn’t.

“Did she—Rach.”

“What?”

“Is there something going on with your mom. Does she have—”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s intense, like your dad.” Rachel wanted to correct Davey. If she thought Marcus had been intense, she didn’t have a clue how Linda could be.

This was all wrong. Very wrong. Rachel felt bad for Davey, not wanting to undermine her shaky optimism.

Rachel looked at her shoes, starting to back away and turned around. “I can’t be alone.”

Davey caught her shoulder. “You’re serious. That’s what’s important to you? Someone is *missing*. He could be out in the woods, or in some basement—”

Facing her fully, Rachel squeezed her hands into tight fists. “You have a family, and guess what? I lost half of mine, so don’t judge me. What, you want me to get locked up for protecting you? You think the police’ll be kind to me and accept it was an accident?”

“You can’t stay there, not after—you were trying to protect me. I’ll defend you.” That warmed Rachel in her heart and other places that were very bad. It wasn’t that she denied she was totally gay for this complete stranger. Guilty as charged and then some.

For one, though, there was no way Davey was into her; she still thought she had a boyfriend who wasn’t sealed up in a freezer because of Rachel. For two—nope, one was enough.

Rach? You’re new at the whole dating thing, but helping your parents kill a cute girl’s boyfriend before the first date is decidedly A Bad Move. And just think what your actions will do to her.

What they’ve already done. And there was no going back. “I have to go.”

“Rach!” People stared at them until Rachel hit the wave of people, getting lost in them. Somewhere along the way, Davey might’ve given up because she was gone.

Rachel swallowed, no longer seeing Linda anywhere, her eyes falling on the smiling baby she saw earlier. The world swayed. A pang settled in her ribs.

You can’t. You can’t protect me, and I can’t protect you. I’ve tried to protect someone before. I can’t do it again.

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18

RACHEL NIBBLED ON a hangnail and thought, and thought, and thought. Her mind kept going, wouldn't shut off. She wished it had batteries, so she could rip them out and stomp on them. Tasting blood, she pulled the sheets over her head, making herself invisible to anything that smelled her.

She could provide the child with a home in the superficial sense, but she would always have this irrational blame toward her baby. She just started her period for the first time not so long ago, and she couldn't be sure she and her baby would live through the birth when she wasn't even fully developed yet.

She could find a family for child.

Because, for years, that worked *so* well for her.

Which meant actually giving birth, breaking her already-broken body.

Rachel rested her hands on her belly and closed her eyes. The skin around her eyes tightened.

She wasn't ready, and she couldn't hurt her baby. What would hurt them the most, though? She couldn't have the child live with guilt for something they couldn't help, and it wasn't fair to expose them to a life where they'd witness death.

Do I want doctors to get that close? After what happened, I don't know if I can.

Rachel faltered, reconsidering giving the baby away after they were born to some adoption place, but she knew what it was like to be orphaned. To be moved around. To have nobody. To be abandoned in the system with no certainty she'd ever have a stable home. To sob with every failed family,

every foster home her baby might be kicked out of, so she could be the leftovers of a careless system she was forced to rely on.

To not belong.

To be alone.

To hate herself for not being able to be loved.

“I love you,” Rachel cried into her hands. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

What would she tell a snaggletoothed child who asked about their daddy?

If she died in childbirth, that’d leave the baby with two cannibals.

A knock on the door.

Rachel rubbed her cheeks clean. “Uh huh?” she called.

The door opened. Linda, her eyes the brightest part of her face, which was dark with lines.

“Hello, I just wanted to check in.”

In that moment, Rachel resented Linda; even with the shadows under her eyes, she always looked perfect, that no-effort kind of perfection.

She probably cried pretty, too.

“Can we talk?” Linda asked.

Rachel sat up. “I mean, I guess.”

Linda settled by her, and they should have talked. Rachel had something crawling in her with sharp, needly claws, something little enough to live in her lungs without them bursting, but she could feel it rubbing her ribs smooth. She needed to talk, but when she had the chance to spill everything, her words were caught.

What was bad was how Linda wasn’t talking. If anyone could talk and keep talking, it was her. It was like she expected Rachel to lead this talk, which would probably end badly. She was still not talking. Okay, her mouth was—still nothing. Shit. Rain thundered on the tin roof and slicked the windows in thick sheets, making everything feel smaller and cramped. God. Why wouldn’t this lady just—

Rachel said, to put herself out of their misery, “There are people who want babies and can’t have them. And here I am, considering . . .”

“Yes, that’s true. That’s what adoption is for.”

“What if they can’t afford that? What if they aren’t near an agency?”

Linda’s eyes brightened in sympathy. “You’re thinking of us, aren’t you? You think I’ll be offended if you abort a baby when we can’t have one.” Abort. Can’t have one. It all was too much information.

“It just wouldn’t be fair for me to kill a baby when others want one so badly, especially after I got myself pregnant by being stupid.”

“You blame yourself for what happened.” Obviously.

Rachel looked down at her hands, which shook. “No.”

“Why did you look away?”

Rachel crossed her arms, not appreciating the scrutiny. “They’re my eyes. I can look away if I want.”

“You wouldn’t be killing a baby. It’d be like when you have a cut, the cells dying. Really, you deserve to focus on yourself and your health right now. You’re—so young. Still developing. A birth would be physically and psychologically trying. And the hormone changes during and after . . . Either way, we’d do our best to help.” Linda paused. “I don’t want to tell you what to do.”

“The baby could die,” Rachel said. *You know, the important one between both of us.* The one, ones, that got billboards along I-85. No one would dedicate a billboard to Rachel.

“*You* could die,” Linda said, “but we’d do anything in our power to prevent it.”

“Do I really have a choice?”

“Yes, one-hundred percent.”

Rachel looked at her feet, which didn’t feel connected to the rest of her body. “I think—I think it’d be best if I didn’t have a baby.”

“All right, then. We can prepare our surgery room.”

The rabbit crawling up her throat scratched at her skull, pain spiking behind her right eye. No matter how much pain meds she’d take, she felt the little paws scrabbling every day, telling her something’s wrong, fix it, it’s broken, it’s broken, it’s broken, everything’s on fire. Not knowing how

hard she tried. It wanted to jump out of her head through her eye; she would too, if she were in a room full of fire. “Surgery room?”

“The work room, where we—” Linda straightened. “There’s a surgery table. For surgeries.” Duh. “It’s perfectly clean.” The last sentence sounded like it was meant to assure Rachel of something she hadn’t spoken aloud.

“Wait, right now? But what’ll . . .”

“We’ll let you rest tonight, and we can do it tomorrow. No pressure. If you want an extra day. Or week.”

“Why are you so nice to me?” *Why haven’t you killed me?*

Linda blinked. “Why wouldn’t I be?” “I—I made you

worry.”

Mouth thin, Linda clasped her hands together. “I did want to talk about your—attempt, though it was eclipsed by—our other concern. But you must understand, I only worry because I care, not because you’re bothering me.” Okay, she was being diplomatic at this point.

“It was a rash, stupid decision.” Rachel blinked away the heaviness in her eyes. “I made it ’cause I felt like I had no choice, but then you said I did have one. It was only a reaction to finding out, you know.” They had spoken about the pregnancy just before, but it felt like no way to state it aloud was appropriate. “The pregnancy” was detached, too clinical for something *right here*. But anything too sweet, too caring, and she might—

Would she change her mind? Could she— *I*

can’t. I can’t.

She could, though. Against her will, she’d survived this much.

Reluctantly, her heart still beat like paws on the forest floor.

“Yes, well, I’m happy to hear it, but I know—I know thoughts like that come when your pain outweighs your ability to deal with that pain, and I want to give you more outlets to cope.”

“Like what?” Rachel chewed on her lip.

“I don’t really know what you like.”

“Huh, I don’t know. Books and writing, I guess.” At Linda’s expression, Rachel blushed and looked at the wood floor, bothering her fingers together. “Guess I don’t seem like the type.” She liked books and writing more in

theory, or more in her own way, not in the right way. The way her teachers liked them.

Linda's hands fluttered before settling on her lap. "That's not it at all! I just wasn't expecting an answer that quickly. We have plenty of books and journals lying about; I've probably read the same thrift store novels fifty times, at least." Linda grew a little perky. "What I was thinking was that Marcus and I could tutor you. Literature, science, anything of interest."

"How will that help?" It sounded boring. These were far from the ideal circumstances, but not dealing with her classmates and dumb textbooks was a bonus of living in the woods with two serial killers.

"It'll distract you."

Rachel felt belittled, like all she needed was a shiny set of keys to forget all that happened to her over the past few years, her losses stacked like skulls. "I'm not stupid. I did go to school, you know."

Doesn't it feel good to have someone looking out for you? Rachel supposed it did, would. *Just give in. Let them help.* The voice sounded like Mama's, but not. She wanted to think Mama was calling her from Heaven and telling her what to do. Making choices was too tiring.

"Of course, but if you're interested . . ." The last word came out like a plea.

Rachel decided to change the subject to something less awkward. "So, what am I supposed to do? It's against the Bible to have an abortion."

You should've kept your legs closed.

Shut up. It wasn't my . . . She couldn't finish the thought because of the backlash from her mind.

"No, it's not," Linda replied.

"Are you a Christian?"

"No. My—my mother . . . Ma was a municipal engineer, mostly secular, who only believed in God because it reminded her of home." One of Linda's hands drifted to the space above her heart. "But I've read all the religious texts I could, you know, morbid curiosity, and the Bible . . ."

“Is pretty weird.”

“Without a doubt. It has nothing about abortion, except instructions on forcing unfaithful women to drink bitter water to miscarry their children. But even if you interpret that another way, there’s no explicit rule against it. God made His men kill, rape, and enslave countless people in His name.”

Rachel stuttered, “I-I wouldn’t . . .” She couldn’t kill someone. It’d haunt her till the day she died. It was weird enough thinking about the fact she was kinda glad Linda and Marcus murdered her brothers, despite what they did.

“I know, but in context, your feelings aren’t quite that awful, are they? It’s a normal procedure. To help you and keep you safe, if that’s what you’ve still decided when the time comes. During the procedure, we’ll have an anesthetic to make any small pains even smaller during the extraction.”

“Who—you’ll have to be in me?” She hadn’t even thought of that.

She thought it’d be as simple as a pill.

Long quiet. She watched the writing spider spin a poem in the mildewed room corner.

“Yes,” Linda said, drawing out the middle. “We don’t have any other means. I can—Marcus can stay out if you want.”

“I don’t want anyone to see, to put anything . . .”

“I know, I know. If you don’t want to do this, you don’t need to.” “But then I’ll have a baby. And I might die. I’m only thirteen, I don’t

have the . . .” She wasn’t developed enough to safely carry the baby. So much could go wrong.

“We wouldn’t let you die, no matter what.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I know you said you want to have the operation, but you don’t need to decide now. It can wait.”

Rachel’s arms shook. “But it can’t! It’ll only get bigger!”

Marcus must’ve heard her yelling because he was in the doorway, silent. Rachel tensed, and after a few seconds, he backed off, but she still felt him close.

Rachel said, “Will it hurt, the—operation? Even with painkillers?” “I—from what I’ve read, you may experience mild pain during, and maybe after the operation, but it’ll be like when you have menstrual cramps.”

From what I’ve read. That was the least assuring thing Rachel had heard in a while.

I only had my period once. It felt like a hundred years ago. “What if it’s different? Aren’t periods sometimes different?”

Linda frowned. “We’ll see. The cramps are because your uterus swells when it has a fetus, and when it’s gone, it’ll contract, shrink to its normal size.”

“Will I bleed?”

“There may be some minor bleeding, yes, but it shouldn’t last more than three weeks.”

“Only that long?” Rachel said dryly before biting her tongue. “You’ll wear a pad, like a normal period.” Rachel said, voice high, “I can’t see it. I can’t.”

Somehow, Linda was closer and farther away. “Trust me. We’ll do what we can. It’ll be all right, Rach.”

It had been a long time since someone comforted her like this, assured her, and she wanted to lean in, to believe Linda, with her fancy degree and nice-smelling lotions, knew even a fraction of what she had endured.

“How do you know?”

Linda looked away, her wavy hair and the shadows hiding everything. “I’ve been in dark places, and now I’m here.”

They weren’t the same person. “Were they as dark as this?”

“I don’t like to compare. Suffice to say, at the time, I thought I wouldn’t survive, but I did. And now I thrive, and anyone who’d hurt me or anyone I love trembles and falls before they can even think about acting on it. But—we can speak about that later. And remember, I want to give you tools to cope with the dark thoughts, and if you ever feel like that—or well, I imagine it’s common, a buzzing inside your head. I’ve been there.” *You?*

But you look so together. “But if it becomes a roar, you can tell me. I won’t judge, believe me.”

“Wait. Why don’t you have a kid?” Or even better, they could do a baby transplant and Rachel wouldn’t have to worry about anything. “You said . . . you can’t. Can—can he not have one? I mean, can he not, is he not . . .”

Linda inhaled deeply, arms forced straight. “I can’t become pregnant.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what a hysterectomy is?”

Rachel did, actually, and resented a little that Linda thought her ignorant. “Yeah, I read something about it in one of Mama’s books and asked her about it. They took your privates out? Why?” It sounded partly barbaric on the doctor’s part, and partly ideal. If she could just take her vagina off awhile like popping off a doll’s head, she wouldn’t have at least ninety percent of her problems.

“Cancer,” Linda said blankly, eyes glassy.

Oh.

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19

RACHEL DIDN'T KNOW what to say, only swallowed. She had never had cancer, and she didn't know anyone who had it. It was a word she heard so often that it had lost its power, and only now did she think its oftenness was what made it devastating.

"That's why it feels unfair of me. Unfair to not want a baby when there are people who want them and can't."

Linda waved. "You shouldn't fret over it. The world has plenty of lost children who need a home, but they're often forgotten."

"Trust me, I know."

Linda set a hand on her shoulder. "Some do find homes."

"Yeah," Rachel said, lowering her hand on her stomach, bloated from her unending problems, the gas, the nausea, a promise, "they do."

They stayed quiet, and Rachel chewed the inside of her cheek. She was warm, but not sweating. At first, she thought it was embarrassment that made heat stir in her lungs. But it reminded her of what she described as a little girl as "smokiness," the smoky feeling when she curled between Mama and Papa under an electric blanket on a winter day.

"You know, you're quite a pretty girl. Maybe that's the part of myself I see in you?"

Rachel snorted. "That's . . . a joke?" Modest, much?

Laughing, Linda nudged her arm. "I resent that!"

Begrudgingly, Rachel smiled. "I'm okay, I guess."

"You have pretty eyes."

"Thanks. I was born with them." They were Mama's, so of course they were beautiful. Rachel had little inside her own skin she felt was beautiful

for its own sake, but then, everyone was a composite of their parents' body parts; it was just gross to think of it like that, without all the talk about souls.

Linda was thinking of something, the shadows under her eyes having that thinky darkness to them, different from tired darkness. Their gazes met.

"I haven't asked much about your parents," said Linda. Was she some kinda mind reader?

"They were killed in the kitchen, our kitchen, a robbery." That's all she needed to know. If she thought too hard about it, she'd think of the blood on the tiles—

"You can, of course, say no, but I was interested in learning more about them." Of course she was. "I thought—once you learn about one's parents, it gives some perspective."

"Mama was a nurse, and Papa was a florist." Rachel didn't want to say much. Mama was Afro-Cuban, Papa was white, and all they had was each other. Coming from a small town, their relationship wasn't exactly welcome. Even in Atlanta, above the moans of the buggy, Rachel had heard soft, cutting whispers she didn't understand when she was at the grocery store with Papa, words like, "Oh gee, I *wonder* what the mommy is." Snickers. It was weird, that obsession with mixed races. Only white people worried about stuff like that where she lived; no one else had the chance. They had bigger problems.

Papa, with his calm nature, would smile down at Rachel and shuffle her to the little mechanical pony at the front of the store, opting to have a conversation with one of the voices. That was the only time he lost his smile and became stone.

No.

Again, she changed the subject back to something more comfortable, or less uncomfortable. "What, will you *really* need to—see me, the inside, to give me a, you know, the surgery?"

Linda frowned, the silence that swollen kind when someone had an unhappy answer. "I—I cannot safely help you with this procedure if I

cannot see your uterus, but I completely understand why you'd be unwilling."

Rachel said, a little bitingly, "Do you?"

After briefly setting her mouth into a hard frown (Rachel could hear her teeth clacking), Linda said, "Yes, and we don't need to do anything without your permission."

"I . . ." Rachel wanted a hoodie, so she could hide her face like she'd do on the school bus as she leaned against the cool window and her finger squeakily followed the dancing raindrops.

What would be more traumatizing, having Linda see her privates during an abortion, or during a birth where a hundred things could go wrong? When Rachel or the baby could die. Her luck had never run smooth.

Rachel could save someone else from being her. Or maybe it wasn't being her, but going through what she had gone through, but weren't those the same things?

They're not.

Are you sure?

"Yeah, okay, just do it. It's nothing no one's seen before."

With fire in her eyes, making them molten, Linda said, "I'm not going to do what they did."

Rachel's hands twitched. "Okay, yes, fine. I said yes. Again. Do it tomorrow."

"Are you sure—"

"Mhm."

"Are you completely—"

"Do I need to say it a hundred times? Yes."

It's official. I'm dinner.

Linda straightened and held her hands out. "We should back up. I need to explain the process. It may make things easier. It may make you calmer."

Easy. "I doubt it, but go ahead."

"I'll clean your vagina and vulva, and numb your cervix."

Okay, okay, there Linda went, going all doctor on her. “What’s that?” It sounded like a type of flying dinosaur.

“The cervix?” Linda did a vagina ghost-map with her fingers. “It’s the narrow part between your vagina and uterus.”

“Isn’t everything the vagina, all the inside stuff?”

Linda gave her a long, unblinking look, and Rachel expected her to ream her out for being stupid. Or to laugh at her like a teacher would. “Were you ever educated about your body?”

“I was just told I bleed there and that I shouldn’t have sex.” She hadn’t even known till a few months ago that she didn’t pee from her vagina. It was all the same to her. A bunch of holes where gross stuff came out.

“I have diagrams I can show you.” Because that’d be fun. “Suffice to say, you have your vagina, the cervix farther along, and then your uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. With a speculum, I’ll stretch your vagina open a little, after I numb you. Then, I’ll take the cells out.”

“You’ll just . . . suck it out, like a black hole and a star? Do black holes eat stars?” Like a vacuum cleaner with lint. It was better than Rachel thought, though. She thought the procedure would involve a scalpel, a scalpel with an edge that’d remind her of the blood falling from Mike’s—

Her world tilted sideways. Shutupshutupshutup.

“That’s a way to put it. Your—mind goes to a different place than mine. Not a bad thing, mind you. You seem to go for the more, ah, abstract ideas.”

“What does that mean?” It sounded insulting, like Rachel’s mind was too impractical. Not a surgeon’s brain, that was for sure.

“I would never make that sort of connection, that comparison. To me, I suppose, everything is itself. Marcus is the same way. We go by the instructions and label things as they are. Your way is more poetic.”

Screw poetry. If Rachel had to read another poem where a white woman’s ~~vagina~~ vulva was a to-be-plucked flower, she would burn every old, moldy poetry book in existence. Poetry was men obsessing over women, alive or dead, probably dead because then she could be perfect forever. Silent. Women died first, so the men could mourn then. At least, they mourned the white ones; they just fucked, tortured, and

left the brown ones. But that wasn't great poem material.

Linda continued, for however long she'd been talking, "It's welcome, your mindset. With the way we see everything, it can be tedious, having the same ways of looking at everything. Seeing everything for what it is."

What a random thing to discuss during an abortion talk. "Do you get bored?"

"I—prefer more human contact than Marcus—meaning I like people, and he doesn't, not that I necessarily prefer anyone over him."

"But it gets boring, having the same everything, every day, right?" Linda smiled, and didn't answer. "Sometimes I go to the Pendlewood library and read to the children, or go to the church events, though I don't believe a lick of any of that. But to answer your question, no, I don't have a suction device. I'll use forceps to remove what's there."

Okay, now we're back. "What will you do with the—pieces, or something?"

Real casual. Linda didn't so much as blink. She rolled her palms together, and Rachel watched. It was a little calming. "It's at your discretion, once the procedure is done."

"I could—could we bury . . . it?" Her baby, her fetus, the reminder of her trauma, it, whatever—she was doing this out of love. To save someone else from being her, from her ruining them because she sure as hell would.

"We'll do it, though you'll need to rest tonight—"

"Like I can sleep."

"You're having sleep troubles, and you didn't tell me?" Linda cleared her throat, smoothing out the severe lines in her face. "You know, you don't need to speak to me about anything you're uncomfortable with, but it's really no trouble for me to help you with that."

"It's nothing. It's fine."

If Linda wasn't sitting, with the tone of her voice, her hands would be on her hips. "It is *not* fine. You need to sleep to fully recuperate. I have sleep medicine, twenty milligrams, it's typically used as a sedative, an antidepressant, but . . ."

Rachel zoned out for about two minutes, wondering just how observant this super fancy doctor with all her degrees was as she still talked.

Wasn’t Rachel’s pain obvious? No one could look at her and think, wow, what a great example of someone who gets their eight hours and eight glasses of water. Always awake, always leaking. Bleeding everywhere, attracting the Thing-of-the-Woods with its yellowed teeth and saliva dripping on her cheek till she internally screamed herself into oblivion, driven only by exhaustion, like a computer going black once it overheats.

Needly paws scratched at her ribs. Yeah. She’d be the sacrifice, the one to fall if this whole arrangement failed like everything else. But her baby—they were doomed from the start.

Her resolve faltered, even as that should’ve cemented. It wasn’t even the procedure that scared her the most, but after. Existing. Being Rachel, whoever she was stretched across all this violence like a rabbit flattened by a car. All she was was what others did to her. She was this baby, a hard presence like a calcified (thanks again, CRCT) tumor. She was *that* night, reeking of alcohol, piss, and blood.

Without her experiences, a string of rotting teeth, she didn’t know how to exist. As a whole person. As even a person.

She’d existed before, though, and to say her suffering was what made her was giving credit to her abusers and taking away what she always had in herself. But she couldn’t help that she felt so unreal. Real people had hobbies. Passions. Dreams. They were given time and validation for those dreams. They were light-eyed with no blood on their clothes, sheets, skin. The kids in the movies who tossed eggs and toilet paper on roofs and windows and knew they wouldn't go to jail without bail. They had more than they could ask for to live. They could survive plus some.

All she had was survival, if that.

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20

LINDA SNAPPED ON her gloves. They were a pretty blue, that light kind with green in it, winter sky promising hail. Rachel stood with a long nightgown on, nothing else underneath. Her bottom lip burned, and Linda had given her chapstick. The small, square room was lit by a craning, standing lamp, which, adjustable at several points, twisted like a bird crammed through a taffy machine. The harsh light spilled over a metal, angled surgery table in the center.

Rachel started, “This is where you . . .” She imagined a body on the table. Someone, still alive. Mike, even though he, unlike her, hadn’t made it this far. Mike, alive, his shock of red hair glowing in the light. Crying, muffled, unheard. Strapped down, a white washcloth stuffed in his mouth. She towered above him, looking down and sneering.

How does it feel? she wanted to ask. Does it feel good? *You’re just nervous. Everyone’s nervous the first time they’re split open.*

Like a rose spreading its lips for a bee, red bloomed from his mouth, spreading on the cloth.

Rachel blinked, and the world returned, empty.

Linda said with her honeyed lilt, like a kindergarten song, “Let’s not focus on anything too strenuous, dear.”

“Kinda difficult.” Kinda impossible.

“Give me the word, and I’ll stop. We can stop.”

“I need to do this.” *I can’t help a child now. I can’t deal with the changes in my—everything. I can’t—I can’t have someone like me face this world.* “I can’t let someone else suffer like me.”

Arms crossed, Marcus stared intently at the anatomical diagrams, a shovel by his right foot. Linda had assured her the shovel was always there.

Besides Linda's strawberry lotion wafting across time and space, the room smelled like bleach and burned Rachel's nose. Her throat knotted up and her head throbbed, stirring a tide of nausea. The heaviness in her head, wiggling behind her right eye, was maybe a migraine, maybe a tumor, maybe something small and furry chewing on her optic nerves like licorice.

Linda patted the surgery table, and Rachel swore that despite the gloves, she saw her wedding ring smirking.

Rachel laid her hands on the table, but didn't climb up. The surface was cool; the way it was lit reminded her of clear water, of how she always wanted to go to the ocean and collect seashells. What would she do with seashells? Put them in the closet, as one did with skeletons; put them on the mantel, like Linda did with porcelain angels because her ma had found them pretty.

Rachel's attention wandered to the wall diagrams and the board full of sharp tools that grinned at her like devious cat teeth. In the square work room with its dank walls and harsh lights, she saw an ax, shears, sharp and funny-looking instruments, door-stopping medical textbooks, and graphic, labeled diagrams taped to the wall with eyes and mouths that have tiny red Xs on them. This is where others died before her, she thought again, their goopy remains scattered throughout the forest or burned.

She wondered if she'd be the same, after this.

She sniffed, but kept her thoughts inside. *I—I should've known. I could control my drinking. I could control riling them up.*

Marcus shifted, his profile to her, hand clasped over his mouth, glare on his glasses.

Please. God. *God, please.* All her fault, soiled, ruined.

Black rabbit stained white.

Run, run.

"Rachel?" Linda was saying, "Rach?"

"I'm okay. I'm okay," she said, not feeling the words on her tongue. "I'm ready."

"Are you sure?"

She didn’t need to do this. She could run and find a normal place (where she had been abandoned by normal people). She could find this place and have her baby. The baby would be fine, and healthy, and loved. It would be normal, and if it were a boy, she’d teach him not to hate women, and if it were a girl, she’d teach her to be strong, but to always carry a knife, since the world wouldn’t protect her. And as much as Rachel would want to protect her baby, her girl, she was sure Mama wanted to protect Rachel, as Mama and Papa would want to protect each other.

And they died. No one protected them, and till Linda and Marcus (or Linda, at least), no one protected Rachel.

Stiffening her shoulders, Rachel raked her eyes down Marcus’ sleeve, trying to find something, something to tell her who he was. Marcus rolled his sleeves up, fidgeting with the balled fabric.

Linda said to her, “You’re safe. We’re here for you.”

Rachel snorted. She’d heard that before from so many people. “I just want it done. I want to move on. With this in me, I can’t. Moving on is a—tall order.” Tall order. Was that even a real expression? Tall order. Torder. Total. “But you’ll help me try, right?”

Linda replied, “Without question.” She raised a hand to help her, but Rachel hoisted herself on the surgery table in the middle of the room alone. It reminded her of how Papa would help her up in the chair when they ate. She wanted him now, helping her, holding her hand, patting her head, wiping away whatever tears would come.

Look at you, he would say when she fidgeted in her seat. *Don’t hop away now.*

I want my papa. She needed him back, more now than ever, more than when he and Mama first died.

“We’re going to give you a sedative and an antibiotic,” Linda said. “The antibiotic will come after the procedure. You . . . you might be a little loopy, or asleep when I administer it.”

Rachel responded, looking to the light, the table, and the diagrams, “Where did you get all this stuff? Does the hospital just give it out?”

“It’s borrowed. Are you still feeling . . . okay?” Like okay had been a thing.

The cold table, shaped like an obtuse angle, made Rachel stiff, but when Linda asked if she could put anything over the table (or maybe it was the buzzing light, and she dreamed it), Rachel said no, since a table could be cleaned. As if noticing the problem through Rachel's expression, Linda said, "I'm sorry. I tried to warm this room up as much as possible. Are you sure . . ." Indeed, in the corner sat a little electric heater. It was as if ghosts rippled beneath the metal. "Okay. Let me know if you change your mind."

Papa . . .

Rachel said nothing, digging her hands into the metal side of the table.

"May I touch you?" Linda asked. What a stupid question, given what'd go down.

I need my papa. Soft-spoken but protective. Picking dandelions with her and going on Easter egg hunts as Mama watched.

Linda waited, the intensity of her blue-green gloves making salt swell on Rachel's tongue. Rachel adjusted her head, already getting a crick in her neck.

"Sure."

Stroking Rachel's hair, Linda dropped her voice. "You are the strongest person I know." Rachel was too tired to shy away, and there was no point, anyway.

Yeah, strong. If she wasn't a slutbitchwhore, Rachel had to be someone's hero. Because Linda wasn't the one on a surgery table about to have a near-stranger perform an operation on her because of something that still haunted her dreams. No matter what Linda said, she didn't know a thing about her.

Rachel said, bitter, "All I do is suffer." It was supposed to be funny. An ongoing joke with the universe at the mic. And once Rachel thought it couldn't get worse, guess what happened? Smile, lean in. It got worse! Cue laughter.

She was aware of Marcus burning a hole in the metal, the back of her head.

Linda stated, "What happened wasn't your fault, wasn't a reflection on you."

“What happened to me, it *is* me.”

“Not at all. You are so much more than suffering, my love.”

My love. Mama would say that. Would have.

Worst case scenario: she died. Best case scenario: she died. That was uplifting.

A kid. Hers. She might die, and her most basic instinct told her to fight that sweet nook of endless sleep. She was only a girl. She hadn’t even lived for one-fifth of a century yet. It wasn’t fair. Nothing was fair.

No, I can’t do this. I can’t live. I don’t know what to do to make everything better.

“Are you ready?” Linda asked.

No, she wasn’t, but she was ready for everything to be done.

Rachel mumbled, “I guess so.”

“I need your full consent.” It was almost stern, and Rachel sighed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready. But—it’s for the best. Do it.”

She had been rarely allowed privacy in life; everybody had been free to pry, prod, and poke. To jeer at the little details she’d wanted to conceal. Exposed atop a table of lights.

Rachel asked, “What’s going to happen after this?” She spread her arms out beside her, skin cold, all traces of self-consciousness leaving her. She only vaguely heard Marcus leaving the room with his heavy steps, and she lifted her skirt up.

This was happening.

If she allowed it.

“You’ll need to give yourself time to heal, but you should function normally.” Should. Linda rested a hand on her knee, never breaking eye contact. “You’ll need to relax. And when the procedure starts, this will help any discomfort.” Rachel followed Linda’s gaze. A bag hung beside Rachel, above her like a soggy cloud, attached to a metal bar.

Rachel squinted. “Is that milk?”

“Propofol,” Linda answered. “An anesthetic.” She elaborated, “It’s to relax you.”

An ache settled in Rachel’s jaw.

She'll kill you, a voice said. Will she, though? And did Rachel care if they did? They had all this time to do it. Why wait this long? They were humans, not cats. Would they wait that long just to mess with her? Rachel's chest seized, each second a palm popping her mouth, shredding her insides to dust.

"Are you ready?" Linda asked, voice strangely echoing as the walls closed in. "I will apply a lubricant—something to make everything feel less uncomfortable."

"Okay, sure. Yes."

"All right. I am doing it now."

A pause, time for her to back out, and then Linda pushing into her. Rachel winced as it happened, thinking it was fine at first, but then she was being ripped in half.

God no, no no. Split in two. Again, always. Her mind shut down, and her body did everything else, clamping down on Linda like she was an infection.

Linda stopped, pulled away. That should've calmed Rachel. It didn't. "I'm sorry, but I need you to relax. It's okay. We can take a break."

Just relax. Words right before her rape. Chiding, like she was inconveniencing her brothers by making it harder for them to hurt her.

Rachel remembered Linda mopping and saying the sounds she heard came from the work room.

They kill people here. Kill them for me to eat.

Blood here, blood everywhere.

Like her blood on the mattress.

Clattering off the table, floundering, not caring which way the gown went, Rachel crawled in the corner by the door. She was loud enough that Marcus hurried to the doorway. The entire room froze.

"I can't," Rachel whimpered, "blood, the blood."

"Where?" Linda asked. "I don't see anything."

"I can't see blood." Rachel pulled her knees to her chest, hoping the pressure would crush the baby out of her. "I *can't*."

"What do you mean, Rach?"

“If I bleed, it’ll—they’ll—they’ll get me.”

Linda’s mouth formed an O to ask “who,” but it died there. She exchanged a glance with Marcus, a question.

Still standing, Marcus kept his distance, but distance meant little in a room this small, a room no more than ten feet wide from each diagrammed wall. He stood by the door, hands by his sides, no sudden movements, not hovering close like Linda. Linda was close, fingers brushing her shoulder with the clean glove, but Rachel’s focus was on Marcus who, seemingly realizing his height, stepped near them and knelt.

Marcus said, each word slow and deliberate, “You’re here, not there. You’re here with us, and we’ll protect you.” It was simple, not a question seeking a too-long answer.

Simple. True. It sounded like something Papa would say to calm her down when she was upset. He wouldn’t scold her, only acknowledge that what happened was rough, but he was here.

Marcus was right. She wasn’t back at that old party cabin. She was in her new home, for better or worse. Even when she didn’t one hundred percent trust these two, she figured she’d never fully trust anyone for a long time. But they’d been there for her, had listened to her. She made requests, boundaries, and they respected them when she had thought someone like her never received (or deserved) respect.

After what felt like an hour, maybe it was, of sitting in that corner, Rachel reached both her hands out. They looked foreign to her in the lights and shadows, like somehow the woods had changed her body, making her a stranger to herself.

They both helped her up, Linda taking her right hand, Marcus her left after some hesitation, and they guided her back to the table.

“Remember,” Linda said, “if you decide you don’t want—”

“I do,” Rachel muttered, simple, true. She hoisted herself up on the table again, now with hands on her elbows and back. The metal was warmer, the light above hissing and buzzing.

Linda said to Marcus, “Sorry love, could you . . .” She looked at Rachel. “Do you want him to leave?”

“I need . . .” She was always alone. Just this moment, she needed someone to hold her hand, to offer a modicum of gentleness. If nothing else,

to distract her.

Marcus went to leave.

Her heart thudded, all senses at full alert, internal fire alarm blaring. Something desperate clicked in her when she saw him head for the door. It reminded her of when Mama would leave for the hospital and she'd cry sometimes, and she spent many hours at the window during twilight waiting for that beaten white car to pull up. She'd stare and quiver in the deepening cold till Papa pulled her away, tempting her with cookies and dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets.

Rachel blurted, cheek on the cold metal, "Wait, no, come back. You, you can stay."

He stopped, and she turned more, but the light on his glasses made his eyes hard to read.

"Are you sure?" Linda asked.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Rachel," he said, sounding stunned, or unsure if he'd gotten her name right. He, somehow—as Linda did—in one word affirmed her personhood, her here-ness. She was here, this was real, and she could get through it.

"That's my name." She swore he sort of smiled, or maybe it was the light playing on shadows. She didn't know if he meant to say anything else. Her elbows ached on the cold metal.

Linda started, "Rach, I know it's uncomfortable, and we can stop, but for the procedure to not hurt you—"

"Go ahead, do it."

When Linda lubricated her insides, Rachel winced, tried not to thrash or cry or think about her humiliation. She reconsidered Marcus being there, but to his credit, he made no sudden moves, didn't do anything without asking, his eyes on the spot by her face, so he didn't embarrass her by seeing her pain. Only when Linda stopped and prepared for the operation did their eyes meet, making Rachel's throat swell with old memories of Papa sitting in a recliner, showing her pictures of flowers, laughing when she said lilies looked like they had bendy Q-tips sticking out of them.

Linda said, "Marcus, will you administer the anesthetic, please?"

He looked at Rachel, and she nodded, but she'd be lying if, even after all that happened, even after what Linda just did, she didn't tense. She looked up at the light, a halo.

Rachel said, "How long will I be—asleep, loopy?"

Marcus frowned, his eyes dark, and she realized he was thinking when that happened. "We're not giving you much, but you can sleep for as long as you need. I doubt you'll conk out for more than a few minutes, unless you faint." He paused, tilting his head. She felt a different awkwardness with him looking at her. Not distrust. Curiosity. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Breathing was like swallowing an ice cube that was angled awful bad in her throat and wouldn't thaw.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Marcus said, needle in hand. Linda held and lubricated a tool she didn't recognize, something resembling a bird's beak.

"What's that?" Rachel asked.

"A speculum," Linda replied. Right. She'd mentioned that before.

"Yes, do it," she said to them both, staring at the light so hard her eyes watered.

A prick in her arm, Marcus taped the needle there. Needles. The Thing-of-the-Wood's eyes crawled like living thorns over her back, but she didn't care.

Almost immediately, that bog between sleep and not-sleep, a step closer to oblivion.

"I . . ." she started.

"What is it?" Marcus said, forehead crinkling. There must've been something in her eyes to tell him she wasn't ready to find out where she'd fall.

Rachel, he had said before, and it unsettled her. The name was awkward on his tongue, but she was no longer The Girl, a bonafide ghost he passed by and avoided, admittedly at Rachel's request.

She opened her mouth. “Hold my . . .” Her fingers fluttered, and so did her brain. She lost tension in her muscles, melting through the table, except Marcus took her hand, keeping her steady, but not afloat.

Linda was saying, “Rachel, if you can hear me, I’m going to ask you to count back from . . .”

Rachel fell.

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21

AT FIRST, EVERY second was tinged with music.

Then, she was in the dark, drowning as scratchy old-timey notes played, the polka kind Papa annoyed her and Mama with as he smirked and Mama sighed against his shoulder. Rachel looked to her left, Marcus' grip fading, his words incoherent, to see Papa crocheting, which he never did. She opened her mouth, and something to her right snapped.

On a surgery table, Mama wrapped bloody black rabbits in white bandages like Rachel patched up her toys. As the cloth bindings tightened, their little bones broke.

Three, Mama said. One small, two big.

I'm falling, Rachel said.

Mama looked up. The surgery light, something was crawling in the bulb. Oh, my love, my heart, this will heal.

But I'm bleed ing.
We all bleed.
We all bleed red.

The light bulb peeled back its lips, teeth gleaming, and lightning bugs poured out.

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Is
under

Where else, but
me?

the Devil
under?

She thought of a colony below the woods, buzzing below her. A teeming honeycomb drooling slimy black yolk and lightning bugs shining in a hundred little briny mouths, and she was salt, scattering.

The darkness burst with colors, orange-yellow-red lightning bugs swarming her, and suddenly, Mama and Papa burned green.

Down's where the Devil is.

The back of her neck prickled, stinging like a horsefly bit her.

Arms out like Christ, she was in water, the world rippling around her, deer with exposed skulls looking down at her, eyes green, till they grew teeth, brown fur turning—

Looking up, really up, Rachel flailed her arms and saw Marcus like he was the moon—too far away to touch, the light playing on his glasses, and it brought her back. His mouth moved, and Mama's voice came out. Rachel tried hard to call out to her.

"M . . . ma . . ."

It's okay. It'll be over soon. You're doing so well.

Another voice said, You're doing so well. So pretty for a . . .

She wasn't, she wasn't. Doing well. A dead Rachel, the living one—

Everyone's nervous the first time.

You're so pretty for a . . .

The world pulled itself inside-out.

No pain. She wiggled inside her body, not feeling its walls. She was slush, the individual notes on a music sheet, the lightning bugs collapsing by her hands, twitching like snow in the wind. Like ash.

Nothing, no

Thing.

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She was stuck, and she wasn't sure if that was good.

If I fly too far again . . .

Something, fingers, Marcus' fingertips soothed her scalp, like she was a fussy baby, like Papa said he did when she cried at night in her crib. Marcus was giving her a touch to focus on, to distract her from what was happening, and

and

and

oh.

not that. Hands

pressed

through

the walls,

s t r e t c h i n g

them

close, ready

to drag

her

away.

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Anything but that.

She thought of That Place in the woods with the lightning bugs buzzing around in circles, little candles in that dark place—green and deep and serene.

Millions of glittering little fires.

No, she couldn’t. Couldn’t do this.

Green, green eyes.

White teeth.

Stop. Stop.

Eat her. Eat me.

It’s going to eat me. It was like Papa would say in his German tongue,

Ich			
esse			
mich.			
ich	esse		me,
no,	I said no,	I sa	
			I’m
I said no, nononononono. I do			not
The	fires died,	leaving her	alone here.

Like Mama and Papa.

This was for the best.

The darkness closed in for

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a week

LIGHT
(l?)
year
(light)
eternity
light

ten minutes.

She shot up into herself, aware of her arms sticking to the metal.

Footsteps, plastic hitting plastic. water running. A bad smell.

Linda, beside her for however long, grasped her hand, no longer wearing a glove, fingers damp. “It’s going to be okay.”

Over, it’s over? She did it? Water leaked out of one of her eyes, and Linda wiped at her cheeks.

The smell, that thick chemical smell. She must’ve bled so much. Her muscles hardened to slate.

Marcus said, “You did well.” Rachel wanted to thank Marcus and tell him to shut up at the same time. A funny prickling in her fingertips. He tightened the large, warm expanse of his hand around hers as Linda gripped the other one.

Rachel muttered, “How long do I need to keep doing this?”

Linda frowned. “‘This’?”

Rachel didn’t explain, since she didn’t know what she meant. Somehow, Linda figured it out, though, by the way her face smoothed like sand after a

wave rolling over it. Linda grew fuzzy, the darkness swallowing her mouth. “You’re more than suffering. Remember that.”

Her vision blackened.

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22

SHE OPENED HER eyes and stared at the ceiling, not wanting the blood and whatever else to scald her memories. When she told her shoulders to let her sit up, they responded with one big no.

The three of them exchanged no words as Linda cleaned up, the sound of metal on metal the only conversation.

After a few minutes, Rachel opened her mouth.

"I want to bury her."

The clinking and shuffling ceased. Linda asked, "How do you know they would've been a girl?"

Rachel blinked, not really thinking on it. Or thinking at all. A thorn pricked the space behind her right eye. "I just know." She knew because it felt as if, instead of scraping away a clump of cells separate but somehow a part of her, Linda had removed a part of her, like God was testing how much could be taken, like cutting dying clay off a pot, to see how long Rachel could still stand, how much could be done with so little.

She knew it because it made her feel better. If it were a boy, she'd need to justify herself more. Bringing a girl into this world was cruel.

She went down again into the black, now quiet, and stayed there for something like an hour.

Linda was saying, "This is such an uncomfortable place to sleep. She needs a pillow."

"She needs her bed."

When she came to again, Linda was above her. Softly, she said, "Rach, are you in pain?"

"A little."

“I’m going to apply this heating pad to your stomach.” She did. “How does that feel?”

Rachel’s head bobbed. “Heaty.”

Linda tilted her head. “That’s—good?”

“Mhm.”

“Do you feel like eating and drinking a little? Just some juice and crackers?”

“M’guess.”

Sitting up, with Linda supporting her back, Rachel heard Marcus walk out. A second, a couple of hours later, or something, she nibbled about two crackers and sipped half the juice box. Her cramps subsided a little, but she was scared to move.

She drank some of the apple juice, her favorite besides grape, but it tasted like vinegar. Linda was away, back to her. Two feet away, no, a mile.

Rachel shook her head. In Linda’s arms was a bloody towel, bundled up to hold—whatever.

She couldn’t look. A rabbit was in her throat, thumping, waiting to get out, waiting for her to vomit black, the fur dancing like little feathers in the white God-light that overtook the room and smelled of bleach and seawater. A hint of lemon.

This was her time to say goodbye, but her mouth was dry with too many words, and thank God Linda tried to keep the towel out of sight as Marcus helped Rachel off the table, supporting her with his arms when she almost fell, wobbling. She didn’t remember going to the living room, but there it was, like a camera when it shutters and unshutters.

When Linda started to go outside, and so did Marcus, Rachel followed, head swaying.

Marcus’ face was lined with something like concern. “You can lie down now. No rush.”

“But I need, need, to see,” she replied. Needed to look, but not see.

Seemed simple enough while doped up out of her ever-loving mind.

“You need to rest,” he said.

Linda nodded. “And you need to, how do I say this delicately—you should have a pad in, in case there’s any, you know.”

“S’not like I’ll bleed out,” Rachel said, though she was partly convinced if she stood long enough, her insides would fall out. She wasn’t even hurting that badly, but it came with the territory of always feeling ripped open and even having your dreams remind you when you were supposed to rest and forget that, yes, *you are a victim.* It wasn’t the sweetest word, but it was true. People could sugar the gory stuff up all they liked, but it didn’t change what happened to her body, and her body didn’t lie.

With a sigh, Linda handed a white sweater jacket to Rachel, which was dully accepted. “I want to give you a choice, but after what happened when you left, you really shouldn’t go outside without a jacket.”

“I had a jacket then.” That was still out there somewhere. Oops.

“Try to keep one on, though.”

Night wiggled through the dogwoods like a tick in a nest of hair as Linda and Marcus dug the grave next to where they planned to expand the rose garden (though Marcus was the one obsessed with flowers). Turned to the side, Rachel stood away from them, to avoid seeing the bloody towel, to avoid ruminating on almost-life.

But it was like the whole thing with Eve and the fruit. Rachel’s eyes and mouth watered when she thought of it—grossly compared what must’ve been a fat, juicy, glowing fruit with what was in her. Eve must’ve thought about that fruit all the time after she saw it, not able to rest, not able to sleep, like back when Rachel enjoyed reading, and she’d go to a book fair. She’d pass a big book, and then obsess over it, feeling some sort of guilt if she didn’t tug Mama’s sleeve.

Somewhere, a dog barked. A yelp. Silence.

Mama. Papa. Were they really with her in the darkness? Damn it. Her head was clearing up. Not totally, though. Just enough to make her sad. *What do you think of me now?*

She looked at the towel they were about to bury, at the red. So stark, unavoidable, mocking her even when night should’ve hidden it. The gnawing in her stomach, a pins-and-needles ache, worsened.

A lightning bug or two flew in her face, and she swatted at them. And as soon as they lit up, they bled into the darkness, but she swore she still heard the buzzing, saw their tiny legs slashing the air.

Snow started to fall.

She ran over to one of the rosebushes, one that was starting to bud, leaned over, and vomited whatever she had last eaten, not that she remembered eating for what seemed like a week. She knew she had, but not before the—operation.

Oh, the crackers.

That was a lot of puke for some stupid crackers.

An unknown span of minutes later, Rachel was in the kitchen, slouched over the table as Linda gave her a wet washcloth.

Beginning the task of wiping dust off the glasses and plates in the pie rack, Marcus said, like they were going over dinner options, “You can take a bath, if you need. It won’t hurt anything.”

“Okay.” All Rachel could say, all she could do not to be stifled in a room with two people who had seen the sickest parts of her life, the scum-lined bottom, and stayed. Actually stayed. The skin under her eyes was heavy and her teeth were lead.

But was it so bad, being here with them? They were so nice and patient. Even . . .

Marcus. He looked at her with new lines in his face, as if he had forgotten a part of his face existed till he saw her lying on that table, curled up in that corner. Rachel didn’t exactly know what to do with her own face, if her face had changed, or maybe she was the same and he saw a part of it he ignored before. She had a hard time knowing where she was, who she was, and whether she’d progressed, stayed the same, or went back. Back to a time, if she were white, the world would’ve been outraged on her behalf.

For now, she had two people, and it had to be enough; it was better than what she had before. And it scared her to think of letting them in day after day because everyone left, no exceptions.

She spent three hours in the tub, dabbing herself carefully with icy water. Linda checked on her four times before Rachel decided to get out, sluggish. Full and empty. The nightgown Linda gave her was clean and smelled like lavender. Before pulling the panties up above her ankles, she opened the cabinet.

Through the door, Linda said, “Do you need help?”

Rachel wanted to protest, but hell, Linda had seen everything. And somehow could look her in the eye without laughing.

“I know, know how to put a dumb pad in. I did it once.” She knew she sounded bitchy, and she shouldn’t if she wanted them to still love her, but she wasn’t even in her own body now. Even when the medicine had faded away, she acted not because she thought on it and acted, but because her limbs moved on their own, knowing what cabinet held the pads, just like Linda showed her.

“Once?”

“I mean, yeah, a few times, during my period.”

“Once. Period. You—you only had your period once before this.” She said it like Rachel had kicked an old lady in front of her—no, like she had seen a puppy die. Rachel didn’t really know what to say. “Having my period once” made it sound like she had it for one day, but it sounded better than saying, “I had my period for five days my first and only week of having a period.” She had only one ten-minute lesson in school about this stuff; she was still learning.

“Yeah, so?” She said the “so” right after she thought that, well, she could have had it later, never if God were kind; if she had started her first period later, she wouldn’t be shimmying up her panties with a thick pad diapering the space between her legs. None of this would’ve happened. She grew lightheaded while standing, but kept her head straight when she opened the door.

Standing in the living room, Linda was wiping at her eyes, like she did the first night Rachel was here, and Rachel was aware of Marcus watching her from the couch. She didn’t know what to think; a few months ago, it would’ve unsettled her to be in the same room as him. He was barely a presence; it was Linda who did everything while he stayed in the background. Sometimes, Rachel would watch him inspect the rosebushes, which had grown stunted and gray after autumn and would bloom again in spring.

When Linda saw Rachel, she smiled. “Sorry, allergies.”

Rachel wanted to apologize; she had never seen anyone cry over her before besides Linda. It seemed like making someone cry was a sure way to

find herself out. In fact, she was more used to people getting angry. She would watch the adults' hands, learning what twitches, what thumb angles meant she needed to duck a blow. Once that thumb was crooked, going under the other fingers, it was over.

She didn't know what to call him. Marcus? That was too familiar. He might get the idea that she liked him more than she had before. And maybe that was a little true, but he didn't need to know that.

He's seen you at your most vulnerable. Is calling him by his name really too familiar? She didn't even call Linda by her name to her face, though.

Next thing she knew, Linda and Marcus were sitting at the table, and she was lying flat on the couch, so close to sleep, but it wasn't the bed. Her bed.

Marcus came over with a puzzle book, putting it back on the shelf.

"Sir?" she mumbled. Maybe she didn't speak at all.

He did a double take and blinked. "Yes?"

Rachel pushed herself into a sitting position, head bobbing. "Could you carry me to sleep?" She rolled those words around in her head, coarse and swelling like wool. "Uh, to—to bed, I mean, to *the* bed. My bed."

He frowned, sucking in his bottom lip. "Are you sure you're comfortable with that?"

She needed someone to do it because all she wanted was that bed, her bed, but she was too tired to move. "Yes, m'too tired."

"How . . ."

She sat with her legs across the cushions and her back straight. After several seconds, he looped his arms around the back of her knees and under her shoulders, pausing. When she didn't protest, he lifted her up, and next she knew, she was in her dark, peaceful bed. She didn't remember if she thanked him.

A hand kneaded her shoulder. "What do you need? What can I get for you?" Linda said somewhere above in the shadows. She was the first person to say that to her, just like that, besides Mama and Papa.

"I just want to sleep." Rachel swallowed, and the spit came back up, resisting her deserty throat. "Maybe some water."

Sometime later, as she closed her eyes, the clink of glass on the nightstand. She heard Linda saying, maybe in her dream, “That was exceptionally kind of you.”

“I can be not just kind, but exceptionally kind, sometimes.” “You’re always exceptional to me.”

It was almost romantic if they didn’t sound like big nerds.

Marcus replied, his voice carrying a faint echo, “It’s the very least I could do. I doubt I was much help today.”

Rachel’s almost-dreams shimmered with lightning bugs, and no matter how much she tried to blink them away, think them away, they stayed.

“You really don’t think so?” Linda replied.

Anything Marcus said was lost in the glittering fog pattering around her, sunlit rain.

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23

LIGHT GLIDED ON the bed. She ached a little down there. On the nightstand sat a glass of water (nice), which she slurped down like she'd been in a desert for forty days, her tongue a leathery toad in her mouth. Homie sat at the end of the bed, purring and winking at her, light gray around his muzzle. She patted his head as she slid out of bed, stopping only when she was a little dizzy. He butted the back of her hand.

Warily, she checked on Linda and Marcus. Not in the kitchen or living room. Peeking in their bedroom, she found them asleep, bundled up together—still in their day clothes with only their shoes removed. Marcus half-sat against the pillows, legs straight out, Linda curled between them, her hands splayed on his chest, head on his shoulder.

It was—it made her sad to see them happy, which was bad of her, but it reminded her of both what she lost—Mama and Papa—and what she'd never have. Happiness. Quiet. Peace.

Love.

Linda was breathing all even, but Marcus' eyes fluttered, like his brain was thinking about kicking him awake. Rachel backed away, wanting to talk, but having no words. Anything she tried to vocalize, to give a word to—the sounds in her heads were roars, the winter wind, screams.

That was worse than the cramps, the nausea: that energy in her telling her to scream, or run, or sometimes hurt herself to drain it out. But she couldn't do anything but lie down and let it weigh her to the bed. It was nothing like air, but as heavy as a rock she needed to roll up a steep mountain.

When Marcus came out, she was sitting on the couch, doing nothing, wrists awkwardly settled on her knees.

No good mornings, only a staring contest. Rachel blinked first.

“I want to go out to the creek.” She needed to see it in the day, not muddied by her nightmares. She wanted to see it with the snow, see it, and mock it because she had lived when she thought she’d die. More than that, she hadn’t completely lied to Linda when she talked about not wanting to be in the cabin all the time.

“Linda should be up soon,” Marcus replied, stiff. “She can go with you.”

“Could . . . *you* go with me?”

Long pause. Rachel almost took it back, wondering if she somehow breached some rule.

He replied slowly, “I suppose I could.”

“I mean, you don’t *have* to.” She took him in. With his dark-but-even stubble and green flannel shirt, he looked like someone trying to fit into the country woods life, but for no fault of his own, he was shoved aside. The lines of his shirt were too straight and somewhat aligned with the black frames of his glasses; it was the most unwrinkled shirt on a guy she’d seen.

She bunched her shoulders like a scrunchie when he walked close; Marcus took a dark green coat off the back of the door.

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Maybe this wasn’t a great idea.

In context, awkwardly sitting beside some old dude at a creek wasn’t the most exciting thing, but at least she wasn’t scared of him anymore. He had brought an old brown satchel with him that had yarn spilling out of its mouth like spaghetti strings. It looked heavy. Maybe it just had a lot of yarn, or a head. She looked across the water at two trees with their trunks snaking together, a thick vine curled around them both.

“That’s weird,” she said. “If one falls, won’t they both go?”
He grunted. “I would say so.”

They sat together in silence, the sort that crawled along her scalp and made the space between her shoulders tighten. It didn’t help when he cleared his throat, and she waited for a lecture.

“You are”—trash, stupid, slutty, whorish—“a young woman.” Marcus continued to face the creek, brow easing back. “A young woman who’s suffered chaos and unhappiness. You may not believe it, and you probably don’t trust me, but you don’t deserve to die. Whatever’s in store for you, I hope it’s good, brilliant, and I want you to be there to experience it. I want to be there too, to see it.”

“Me too.” Being happy sounded pretty swell. Rachel, taken aback, chanced a quick glance at him before returning her tired gaze to the water. The chittering and buzzing around them almost drowned her out. “Thanks.”

“You’re hurting,” Marcus continued, looking at her, straight at her. He raised a hand, as if to touch her arm or cheek, but then rested it back to the ground. She tried not to waver as she met his eyes. “You aren’t weak for considering death. You’re a kid who’s had tough breaks, nothing you deserved or controlled.”

A kid. Rachel didn’t know what was worse: being a young person surrounded by grown-ups, or feeling as if she skipped a heavy portion of her childhood.

She opened her mouth to speak, before closing it. In the meadow across the creek, there were five does and a buck standing perfectly still; Rachel just noticed them. Maybe they weren’t real. A shining peace tingled the air till the buck charged after the does.

Rachel couldn’t help but stare at the violent, frenzied dance. In the city, she’d never witnessed something like that, so many deer at once; she’d only been used to seeing their disemboweled bodies on the highway.

“They have faces,” Rachel noted. She felt him looking at her, but her attention was on the deer. She imagined him confused, completely out of his comfort zone, at the very end of his cool-and-collected rope. It was more funny than scary.

Marcus didn’t make any comment for a long while; they spent the time watching the water curl over fallen logs and rocks.

She said, voice in tune with the gently bubbling creek, “You carried me h—here. It was you.” Just thinking of it made puke swell in her throat.

“Yes,” Marcus said eventually. They didn’t look at each other. “I didn’t—I didn’t want to invade your space, but we didn’t want you to stay . . . there.” In a bloodbath they created when, God, they rescued her and gave her a home. A home where they didn’t pressure her to go to school or do anything to complicate her recovery. She could go wherever she wanted.

Recovery, like she’d recover as easily as one dealt with a minor sprain or scraped knee.

“I was thinking,” he added after a pause, “we thought we could start helping you—tutoring you.”

“Yeah, Lin—she told me. As a distraction, or something.” Because that was all it could be. It wasn’t as if Rachel expected to only stay with the serial killers who cared for her for a few years; it was a life arrangement. A distraction, like he was distracting from the topic of that night when all the bad things happened. It was kind of sweet.

“Oh.” He cleared his throat, looking—flustered?

“I really appreciated you staying by me during that whole thing, sir.” He blinked. “You don’t need to call me ‘sir’.” “I don’t know what else to say.”

“If you aren’t comfortable calling me by my name, I’d rather you call me nothing at all.”

“Sorry.”

“I didn’t say that because I’m offended.” It was weird, an adult who didn’t want a respectful title. She always thought teachers lived for that, like the Language Arts teacher who insisted it wasn’t Mr. Rhodes, but Dr. Rhodes, or Master. It was like when she was six and if the kids got enough gold stars, they could be the king or queen of the classroom. People, big and small, liked big titles. Behind Marcus, she saw a brown rabbit, though it was hard to see in the nothing-color of the dead leaves.

When she looked to where the deer once were, Rachel said, “I wonder where they went.”

He hummed. “You could find out.”

“Uh, I could?”

“It’s a matter of knowing how to track. Would you be interested in that?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t hunt.”

“You wouldn’t need to,” he said, and Rachel looked down at her hands. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. Here.”

He handed her a cinder block. Actually, it was a big red book called, *The Complete William Shakespeare*. The letters were engraved gold, and she turned it over to read the back.

“‘The epeh-tome of Western literature’,” she said.

“Epitome,” Marcus corrected. When Rachel bunched up her shoulders, he said, “No, no, don’t be embarrassed.”

“I—don’t know a lot of words.”

“That’s not your fault. You’re young. I suppose I wouldn’t have called myself all that intelligent till I was halfway through college. Actually—in retrospect, that’s when I think I got smart. I’m sure there are times in high school I thought I was a genius.” Rachel didn’t exactly see why that was a problem. “But you—you already seem like you’re far smarter than me when I was your age.”

“How?”

“Some of the words you use, some of your expressions. I can tell you’re well-read.”

Rachel’s ears burned, like she’d been caught doing something wrong. She turned the book back over and opened to the list of plays. “Why start

with Shakespeare? I mean, isn't this a little . . . advanced?"

"Don't focus on the dense language. Focus on the story. The meaning will be clear, even if the words aren't." The corners of his mouth deepened in not quite a smile. "Besides, like I said, you have a good vocabulary."

Nobody had told her that before. "Thanks. Lots of studying for tests." Rachel flipped to the first play in the collection. "*Titus Andronicus*?"

He reached over, as if to take the book from her, but instead flipped the pages as he spoke. "That one may be a bit—dark. Here, *Twelfth Night*. That's a pleasant one."

She didn't know whether his concern was sweet or patronizing. He was treating her like she was fragile, but, yeah, she was, and it felt good to have someone consider her health.

"I can handle dark. I wasn't born yesterday." *And I live with two cannibals who avenged my—me.* How bad could some stuffy old play be? She flipped through the play in front of her. Shipwreck, Viola, Olivia, words blurring together. "What does 'visage' mean?" Rachel wrinkled her nose, tapping her front teeth with her thumb.

"A face, or facial expression," Marcus replied.

I brought you in the woods because I wanted to be in the woods doing woods things, not reading some dead guy's stuff.

As she read, he gave her space, even though he didn't move. He took out another book from his yarn-barfing bag. *The Duchess of Malfi*. She wanted to ask what it was about, but she figured he'd be afraid she couldn't take it.

All he said before he let her read Shakespeare was, "I like plays. All of the substance, none of the droning on about trees and politics between the lines."

That was all well and good, but *Twelfth Night* was kinda boring, so Rachel skipped around, and Marcus said nothing about it. She noticed a pattern. *King Lear. The Tempest.* The king and Cordelia. Prospero and Miranda. Dads caring about daughters.

"Wow, King Lear really likes Cordelia," Rachel said.

Marcus' reply, beyond lowering his book, was less of a word but a series of failed half-words. Eventually, like an engine in winter, he started up. "You might not want to read one of the tragedies. They're a bit depressing, and that affection isn't quite . . ."

"This is nice, a dad and his kid liking each other. I thought you hated me." A pause. Her face burned.

You nailed it, 10/10.

She wanted to jump in the creek.

After a minute, Marcus cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for how I've acted. I can see how it—I didn't know what to say or do, so I kept back."

"You kept calling me 'The Girl', like I didn't have a name."

"It's just—I call our cat 'the cat'. It's how I speak, with—some distance."

Rachel frowned. "But I'm not a cat."

He bowed his head, lips pursed in thought. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"And you said what happened to me was my fault. Because I was drunk."

His eyes went wide. "When?"

"The first night I was here. When you were talking to Linda in your room." She took great interest in chewing on a hangnail.

His lips were thin, and he rubbed his face with his hands. He must have forgotten, and probably felt like a heckuva prick. Rachel didn't want him to feel guilty, not anymore. She wasn't angry, just tired. Though she'd slept a lot, the thundering and hissing of the creek made her eyes droop. Eventually, before noon, she'd go back to bed; she practically lived there.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault. I hope you know that." They both stared at the creek. Across the water, three fat white rabbits squatted and did nothing. Rachel stretched on the grass, and it tickled her arms. She flicked an ant off her shoulder. Even though she and Marcus were quiet, the rabbits' ears perked, and they darted into the bushes.

"Rabbits are gross," Rachel said. *And they scream like women when they die.* She had an elementary school friend named Tana who had a bunch of rabbits. They had lived in cages, and they would have babies and kill them

when they took up too much space. Smushed, tiny corpses crammed in the corners. Tana had clean-up duty.

"I had one when I was a kid," Marcus confided.

"What, like sixty years ago?" She bit her lip. Stupid.

He snorted. "Believe it or not, but it wasn't that long ago."
"When?"
"In the Seventies."

Rachel released a long whistle.

"*Anyway*," he said, "I had one once. It was a hassle at first, and not the cleanest pet, but it made me happy. My mother hated it." He flashed an honest smile. It faded just as quickly as it arrived. "She and Dad died when I was young. Let's just say I didn't have the most impressive adolescence."

At first, there was nothing Rachel could say beyond *I'm sorry*, which was what she always said. Instead, Rachel nodded. She forgot if she ever told him, or if Linda had . . . "My parents died in a robbery when I was eight."

"I'm sorry to hear that." When he looked at her, her heart went faster, not because of what he said, but because his eyes said he understood. He saw her, for real.

Rachel continued with a croak, suddenly really tired, "Everything was nice till Mama and Papa died. I don't even know what happened to them after they died—where they were buried." *If they're watching me right, now, if they've seen everything and still love me* . . . The silence after was uncomfortable, so she said, "It's weird how the snow came and went, how it went from cold to warm."

Like that, they had moved on. If she let him treat her like a daughter, like she let Linda, if she was less stubborn, less bitter, she could have the family she had lost. And so long as nothing bad happened, she wouldn't be alone in the world again. She was smiling, and it hurt, but it was a good hurt. Actually something good, and maybe one day, it wouldn't hurt.

Marcus watched her as he stood. "The day's too beautiful to not cook out." He extended a hand, and Rachel reached for it.

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THE NEXT DAY, it’d gotten cold again, and after Linda joined her, Rachel studied like a good girl in her bed. It was littered with books that had numbers and letters together in ways she hadn’t seen in her fourth-grade algebra lessons. Books with paintings of dead women by dead men.

She was doing something. Being someone. She was giving up, becoming what other people needed. Or was it that this was her, but she always needed to put up defenses? She kept her unsafe thoughts in the journal. The swirling eyes and teeth. At night, she stuffed the journal under the mattress, and it stayed there like a secret lover’s gift. Not that she ever had a secret lover to serenade her in iambic pentameter while she was trying to sleep. Probably better that way.

Later that day, Rachel’s mood soured as she felt her body changing, cramps needling her lower parts. Body like clay and feeling every squeeze. Her chest ached so bad it was like an elephant did yoga on it. *(It's supposed to be over. Aren’t they big enough already?)* She scratched her pimples and sucked the pus off her fingers; there was nothing more satisfying than popping zits. Plucked straight out of who she was before, she was becoming unknown to herself again.

When she went in the bathroom to change the pad, she saw the pink stains, and her vision went green-gold. She fumbled, grasping the shower curtain and falling.

Rapid knocking on the door. Linda. It was about that time living with someone when she recognized how people knocked or how their footsteps landed. “Rach—Rachel, what is it?”

“I tripped.”

“Are you okay? Did you hit your head?” “No, I just . . . saw the blood on my panties.” “It’s—it’s normal. It’ll be okay.”

Rachel stood and quickly pulled the gown over her head. “I can’t see blood.” She stared at the door. “You can come in.”

Linda did, looking her over with sad, half-lidded eyes. “Why?”

“Why can you come in?”

“Why can’t you see blood? Is it the same as what happened in the work room?”

Rachel lowered her head. “It makes me remember.”

After a long pause, Linda set a hand on her shoulder. “All right, just don’t look. I can get you new clothes, if anything’s stained. I can burn—anything you need.” That was how they would help each other: destruction. “It looks like everything’s fine.”

Rachel wanted to laugh. “It’s too late. It’s coming for me.”

Linda frowned. “What is coming for you?”

She couldn’t say the truth. Couldn’t let either of them know because they wouldn’t believe her. Even rolling it around in her head made it sound crazy. The bear thing, that Thing. Part of the woods, the mud and cold, the lightning bugs. It would take her back there.

She burst out of the bathroom, bumping past Linda. “Nothing.”

Linda followed. “What is it?”

Marcus, on the couch with his yarn, stood.

Rachel stopped, caught between them.

“Rach, what is it?” Linda said with desperation. “Please, look at me, I want to help. You know you can—”

“I can’t.” Rachel stared at her feet, heat bubbling up her throat.

Marcus’ brown loafers came close. “Rachel . . .”

Seeing a green glint on his glasses, she lurched away like he burned her, looking at him with wild eyes. She saw the hurt spreading across his face, the split between them no matter what he did.

In a month, in a year, would she actually go up instead of being okay one day and sick in bed the next? What would it take for the memories and fear to end? Maybe it’d take the old thing where they’d split someone’s brain in half. Maybe she needed to die after all.

She wondered what would happen when she died, what purpose she'd serve. There could be Heaven, and she'd see Mama and Papa again, and maybe they'd be the same. Or they'd be different, another loss. Or she could be before a scale with a feather on it. Or nothing, what was crawling up her ribs now.

Crawling on the windows. Coming for blood.

Rachel fell on the carpet, curling her arms around her knees and rocking with the fire to her back.

She saw Linda's purple slippers and Marcus' loafers.

"The dreams," she said.

Linda replied, but Rachel only heard the roaring in her ears. The Thing-of-the-Woods. Coming for her. Ready to eat her. Have her inside it.

She couldn't breathe.

"I can't stop thinking . . ." She choked on her own spit, snot pouring out her right nostril. "I was nothing to them. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

Kneeling too, Linda scooted close, only a little. Marcus continued standing. If he wasn't breathing, the slow rise and fall of his chest, she would think he was a ghost.

"Who?" Linda asked.

Rachel shut her eyes. *Who the hell do you think?*

"Everyone." She rubbed her closed eyes so hard she saw white. "My teachers, the social workers, my foster parents, my brothers . . ."

Marcus said, "They were wrong." He made it sound so easy.

"Can *everyone* be wrong?" Rachel squeaked. "Can the whole world be wrong?"

"We don't think you're nothing," Linda whispered. "Don't we count?"

They couldn't count because they would eventually turn on her. Unless she acted like she should. They could deny it all they wanted, but all they were doing was whittling her down, like everyone else did. Making her give in, or die.

Giving in—God, she was tired. It sounded better and better every single day. Sleep sounded a whole lot easier if she were dead. She could be strong,

as a girl with her face was always told to be. But people didn't help strong girls, give them little touches and kind words because they could handle themselves, their hearts were iron. They were too noisy, too angry, too much.

The only way for her to find her voice was to lose it; it was inevitable. Lose her voice and claim a new home, rather than be tied to her old memories, her old city. Lose Mama and Papa as the only good things she had in life. As weird as it sounded, an odd comfort came from that. With each failed new home, she never felt like she betrayed Mama and Papa.

Rachel said, "They made me want to die."

"But you're here," Linda said. She reached out and took Rachel's hands. "See? This is real."

"I still feel . . ." Rachel wet her lips and looked to the ceiling, blinking the dampness back. She wanted to yank her hands away like she would've the first week she was here.

She was tired of fighting. Tired of being . . .

"Alone?" said Marcus.

A hot tear fell down her cheek. "There's this piece of me that was . . . I don't know, taken? It was taken, and everything looks different, and only I can see what that's like. I hate—I hate so many things. I'm so angry, and I don't want to be."

"And is that what you need," Linda asked, thumb rubbing against Rachel's, "for someone to understand?"

"I need that piece back."

"You can't get it back," Marcus said. Rachel snapped her head up. "If you keep looking for your past self, you'll only stay miserable."

Rachel gaped, more tears coming. "Why would you . . ." Asshole. He was an asshole. How could he say that?

"He's right," Linda said gravely, and Rachel watched her in shock. "You—every loss changes you. You don't grow stronger or weaker with every single one. It's not that predictable. You change. Any strength is already there, forced out. And you learn to cope with a new reality. That doesn't mean you can't find ways to feel whole, mind you. But if you keep looking to the past, keep trying to bring it back, you—you can't. It's gone. That

person you were is gone, but . . .” Linda extended a hand. “That doesn’t mean the Rachel here with us is less.”

It hurt more than everything else happening to her body. She forgot her small cramps, and it became hard to breathe. Mama and Papa died again. Blood on the tiles, the killer with gun in shaking hand, eyes glinting green when he noticed Rachel watching under the table. And he ran. Ran from what he did, ran from seeing who he left behind in that river of blood. On the tiles Rachel had crawled and waddled on. Right there, on that night, the tiles chilled her tummy through her yellow llama pajamas. *The Emperor’s New Groove* was a thing then, and Rachel had loved rabbits, and what were llamas but long-necked rabbits? She’d prance in front of her stuffed animals and go yikes, yikes, yikes.

As absurd as it was, Rachel knew her parents were dead. She saw it.

But it never sank in that they’d never come back. Literally, yeah, they were gone, but she tried to recreate them in teachers, in foster parents. Even here, she considered how similar Linda’s hair was to Mama’s, how Marcus’ more timid mannerisms reminded her of Papa at home.

Rachel crawled closer to Linda and buried her head against her shoulder, letting herself cry. At first, she tried to keep herself composed, even with a few tears, but then it hit her again.

Mama and Papa were gone, forever. Maybe forever forever, since she didn’t know if what she believed since she could believe in anything was true. That had been another conciliation, Heaven. Any lost opportunities, birthdays her parents missed, they could make it up for an eternity in Heaven. She had thought . . .

She started to scream, and they fell orange-yellow on the green rug. Linda put a hand on her head, which made Rachel flinch, recalling how Mike had touched her there when he stuck himself in her mouth before he and the others hurt her. Linda hesitated.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said, barely understanding her own words. Linda’s other hand hovered before settling lightly between Rachel's shoulder blades, only to pull away. “I . . . are you sure . . .”

Rachel flung her arms around Linda, pulling her close, feeling her spine on her fingers, her heart beating against Rachel’s cheek.

Marcus, quiet as one of the forest ghosts, patted her shoulder from behind, but made no moves otherwise. They stayed there as the tinny patter of freezing rain hitting the roof swarmed the room. And she felt safe, a feeling she hadn't had since she was little.

"You *should* be angry," he murmured, fingers heavy on her.

There it was. No Shhh or It's going to be okay. And it felt good for someone to tell her that, to remind her she was allowed the feelings she was told were wrong, the ones that made her a bad person when she was always told to bend over backwards and accept apologies.

They had seen more of her than any other living person, and that should've motivated her, but she was tired of running, of denying. All she wanted was sleep and for someone to ensure she was safe as she bled and the trees lurked close, bending with the weight of frozen rain.

Eventually, her weeping became dry sobbing. When she mostly stopped, she said, "I—I don't want to sleep alone."

"I'll sleep on the couch," Marcus offered. "And you can sleep in our bed."

It was sweet, but even if the thought of a man being in a bed near her made her flush, Rachel didn't feel right kicking someone out of their own bed. "You don't have to."

"It's for the best," Marcus said. "The bed would be a tight squeeze with all three of us."

Linda gave her a long look, a look heavy with a thousand words.

She went to sleep that evening with Linda snoring by her, and Marcus sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to them both. As the room darkened, Rachel tried to make out his expression, but then gave into sleep as she saw him stand and fade into oblivion.

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LOVE SHONE IN Linda's eyes during the very brief church lunch after Davey was nowhere to be found and she curled Rachel's hair behind her ears. It was like they were the only two people there. For those few minutes, Rachel thought they'd survive the pain they went through, and no one would ruin that. All through the years she stayed with Linda and Marcus, they taught her almost everything. When it came to hunting, they stopped at tracking, and Rachel, even if she couldn't kill someone, wanted to impress them and prove she was a smart grownup like them.

Her stomach roiled, and when she looked at the hollowed-out gourds on clotheslines by the church and the scarlet cardinals fighting over birdseed, she imagined the gourds as little, fat corpses.

When the church event was over and she had her fill of potato salad and bland macaroni for two lifetimes, Rachel again looked for Davey, her hand on the cool green of the pickup truck, and couldn't find her.

I've tried to protect someone before, and I lost them too. I lost them to protect them. She can't expect me to give up my life.

Linda and Rachel got into the pickup truck. The blue tarp in the truck bed rippled, and Rachel shook her head. She looked at herself, at Linda's sleeve.

No blood anywhere. Everything was fine. She wasn't seeing anything. She would go home and forget about Davey, forget about Noah. Mourn Marcus and live as best she could with Linda. She'd remember who really mattered.

It'd be fine.

She jumped when the pickup started, and the passenger window lowered.

“Rach?” Linda said, leaning over the console to regard Rachel with a deeply lined face. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, just tired. Full belly and all.” She paused as she put the seatbelt on. “We should do this again. It was fun.”

Linda smiled, but nothing could keep the blue shadows under her eyes away. “It was.”

They spent most of the drive in a new silence. It had familiarity and something she couldn’t place, a strangeness. They passed an empty field with a swaying, snow-bound scarecrow. It had a large white smile painted on its head.

Breaking the silence, Linda asked, “What’s the girl’s name, again?” Rachel tilted her head and lowly hummed, pretending to struggle to remember. “Dani, I think.”

“Oh, well, it’s always nice to find people to chat with.”

“Yeah,” Rachel replied, closing her eyes and seeing the scarecrow’s grin going green-blue across the black.

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In the work room, Rachel helped Linda change the bandages of her arm wound; it looked okay. Any discomfort she once felt in this room had died under the thunder of everything else happening, the lightning frying all the fucks she had given before. As Rachel checked to make sure Linda's arm wouldn't fall off, Linda hummed as she sat on the surgery table and glowed in the light, and Rachel thought about asking what she was humming. Right now, she wanted to sleep and talk later. The more she talked when she was tired, the more she felt she'd slip.

"You should really think about being a doctor," Linda said, and Rachel couldn't tell if she was teasing. "You're a pro."

They went to Linda's bed and rested, flat on their backs. Rachel stared at the array of angels on the dresser. They all judged her with the soulless blue eyes.

"How did you and Marcus first meet? What was it like back in Atlanta?"

"We met when a man's liver was impaled with a pipe as he was driving."

What. The. Fuck.

"Oh. Did you eat him?"

"No. He was a hospital patient, and that'd be against the Hippocratic Oath." Rachel was glad to hear that, all murders aside, Linda followed an oath. "We had a date after, an okay one. At first. My heels were killing me; I still remember leaning on my counter and looking down to see the marks they cut into my heel. We were talking, and I can't recall what led up to it, but I told him I'd been raped by an old boyfriend." She cleared her throat. "He tried to comfort me, to tell me his story, but before he could get anything out, I made him leave my apartment." Her voice trembled, though she remained still. "I was so angry at the world, and that included him. And he left, just like that.

"I remember, a few months after, we married because it was convenient for taxes. And we had killed someone, a man who tried to roofie a woman, and that bonds you—the killing, not the roofying."

They needed to back up here. “The man you killed tried to drug someone . . .” No matter what, she couldn’t feel bad for an attempted rapist.

So that meant it was Linda’s right to execute him? Why her, and not the girl he tried to drug? Did Linda really do it for the greater good? Rachel needed to believe she did, but now . . .

“Yes,” Linda replied. “You could say I gave him a taste of his own medicine, and Marcus came by when I had him strapped to my kitchen table. I remember Marcus, roses in hand, that look of being—dumbfounded.” Linda beamed, rotating her wedding ring around her finger as a tear slipped down her cheek. “Him and his roses.”

Rachel felt like something was eating her heart from the inside out.

Sweat prickled the skin under her arms, and her throat itched. “But . . .

you didn’t love each other at first?”

“No, but we respected each other and worked together. That was more important to me.” Linda swallowed, taking a deep breath. “We married, and on our wedding night—do you really want to hear this?”

“As long as there are no gory details.”

Taking on a Southern affect, Linda said, “Dear me, I’d never be so indecent!” In her normal voice, she continued, “I hadn’t—I remember the scar on his right knee when he fell on glass as a child. This was before he told me what happened to him.”

“But you . . .”

“I had told him everything. He didn’t—I suppose there are expectations we set for ourselves, even when we reject the society that set them. He—I started, you know, pleasuring him.”

Oh. Okay. “You put his thing in your mouth,” Rachel said, feeling awkward. It was stupid because, as Linda would say, for all intents and purposes, she had sucked dicks. (Linda would say “for all intents and purposes,” not the other one.) Not many, but it made her feel hot with shame, even when she tried so hard to tell herself it hadn’t been what led to her rape. It hurt to think that just maybe, her foster brothers had groomed her and planned to abuse her from the start by preying on her need to feel accepted.

Also, as silly as it was, she didn’t really like reminding herself that Marcus had a *thing*.

Linda waved with a cursory mhm. “And once I touched him like that, he went to the bathroom and threw up. He . . . when I went to check on him, he was sitting there, crying.” She went quiet for a minute. “I put on a robe and sat there with him, not knowing what to say or what was wrong. I helped him clean his face with a washcloth, and we returned to bed. He put some pants on, and I let him cry against me and tell me what happened till he fell asleep with his head on my knee, and I hated myself because I had resented him once.

“When I let slip I’d been raped, all the gory details, he told me he understood, and I slammed my hand on the counter and made him leave my apartment. Not even thinking about it, I made him remember his trauma, and I didn’t know, didn’t mean to.” Linda’s voice was rhythmic and quiet. Another tear slipped down her cheek, and Rachel tenderly wiped it away. “I didn’t even consider he could have ever gone through that. Even after what I said, that he couldn’t understand, that he was a fool for trying, how I let my anger eat me alive, he stayed with me.”

“I was angry at you too when you said you understood me. But how could we’ve known?” Trauma, especially this kind, was something society taught them to keep quiet about. Nothing could be gleaned from silence except ignorance. She wondered how many girls she knew who’d gone through what she had, and they passed each other in the hallways.

The insidious part of it all was that even if their traumas were similar, the reaction could vary so wildly there was no telling if they’d actually relate to each other. Some people cried, some people didn’t, and they’d resent each other for not acting correctly. In the horrible way of finding others who endured immense pain, Rachel, Linda, and Marcus had gotten lucky. Lucky-ish.

Linda touched Rachel’s hair; of everyone in the world, only Linda and Marcus had been given permission to do that. In this moment, Rachel felt like she was one with somebody, and she thanked God she wasn’t facing Marcus’ death alone, as selfish as it was.

But aren't you? You killed him, and she can never know. She was alone in the truth, since she couldn't drag Davey into this and get someone else killed.

After a few minutes, with her hands still furled in Rachel's hair, Linda snored. Rachel fell asleep for an unknown span of time till she woke up to her bladder aching like a troupe of fire ants scurried on it. When Rachel tugged away from Linda's grip, she stared at her adoptive mother.

She didn't recognize her. It was like that strange moment when a child realized their mom wasn't just Mom, that she was deeply flawed and troubled with her own complicated history; she existed beyond being a moon orbiting around her child's pull.

When she first met Linda, Rachel saw her as someone who revolved around her, who only existed to fulfill that lost love. Rachel hadn't wanted to give anyone a chance because she'd only be hurt again, but eventually, she let Linda be her guardian and teacher.

Mom. The warmth in her heart hurt, like a fiery thorn, like lightning in a moonshine jar. She once resented Linda for always looking together and perfect. Now, seeing her hair oily and eyes going deep in the hollows of her skull, Rachel would've given her heart on a platter to take it all back.

I saved someone. So why do I feel like I've doomed everything?

After relieving herself, Rachel sat on her own bed. She leaned down to reach for her journal, but stopped, raising up. Her fingers brushed the afghan on the bed, the one Marcus finished for her, her throat swelling. Right now, she could roll up in it and forget everything for a few hours.

Rachel startled when a shadow went over her window, and she turned to open it when she saw who it was.

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The next morning, as Rachel sucked on a strawberry, Marcus sat with her with dark circles under his eyes. She felt guilty and swallowed the fruit chunk down the wrong way.

“Rachel, I want to talk with you,” he said.

She’d screwed up. She’d done it this time, so messed up not even cannibals could stay with her there for too long before they went enough is enough, time to return the brat.

“What is it?” she said, swallowing the rest of the strawberry flesh. He sucked in his bottom lip, looking off to the space by Rachel’s left ear.

I’m done. They’re kicking me out. Tears pricked her eyes, and like he did, she sucked in her lip to keep from crying. In a few days, she had gone from hiding herself to crying all over the place, embarrassing herself.

“Do you really blame yourself for what happened to you? Do you think it made you nothing?”

Rachel looked at the table. “I am nothing.”

He breathed in sharply, like she socked him in the gut. She didn’t get it. She was a pain. Bleeding everywhere, breaking everything. She had been grumpy and spent more time in bed than trying to make nice. And yet what she said, when she looked at him, made him look like he was holding back as many tears as her.

“No, you’re not,” he said, each word falling like a stone in water. “Your name is Rachel.”

At the sound of her own name just then, she couldn’t breathe.

“I’m a slut.”

“You are a young woman given a bad shot at life, but we can’t always help what we’re given. Your name is Rachel, and it’s not your fault.”

That struck her wrong, like he was talking about himself instead of her. But that was ridiculous.

Why was he doing this? She didn’t lie to herself about whose idea it’d been to take her in. She had been given a choice that hadn’t been a choice at all, and in the end, if she had to choose one of them to trust, it’d be Linda.

And it was her choice to decide whether she blamed herself for that night.

Marcus said, fingers flat on the table, “Go ahead, say it. ‘My name is Rachel, and it’s not my fault’.”

She balled her hands. “Why, like I owe it to you, like some apology?”

Softly, desperately, he said, leaning forward, eyes bright, “It’s not your fault.”

Heat flooded her fingers. “Don’t tell me what to say.” She set her nails on the table, electricity ripping through her. At his soft expression, she broke. “You don’t understand. No matter what you saw. You could never understand.” Her helplessness, dependence, fear. Always too much or not enough. Always taken and worn down and thrown away.

It was then she realized they weren’t alone. Linda leaned in the arch, and as if their minds were linked, Marcus looked at her, their faces identical. Knowing.

Softly, with her arms crossed, Linda said to Marcus, “I’m going to . . .”

Marcus’ lips thinned, and he stared at his joined hands.

Silence.

Rachel prodded, “What is it?”

Moving to sit with them, Linda breathed deep through her nose, and Rachel opened her mouth to press her—especially when the woman’s eyes got that dead winter shine—but closed it when a pang started in the back of her throat.

“When I was younger,” Linda said, staring at her trembling hands, “I was—I was raped.”

Rachel felt dumb and small. Marcus had gone paler, balling his hands together, but he didn’t look surprised.

Linda started, after swallowing thickly and clearing her throat, “When I was in high school, I would—I took heroin to cope with my stress, trying to be the perfect daughter. All my mother expected of me . . . it was a mistake, one I suffered through, and the withdrawal—it almost killed my mother and me. But it made me feel blissful.” Rachel leaned in.

“One day—it was in April. There was pollen, and I can still smell the blue sky.”

Linda frowned, and Marcus rubbed his mouth with his knuckles, another hand running down his neck.

“And the freshly cut, green grass. I was with my boyfriend, Kyle, who got me into the heroin—sky, we called it. A taste of sky.” Rachel supposed it was more poetic than smack or junk. “We were on the grass, a little field behind our high school, and he started kissing me. I couldn’t move. When I tried, it was if part of me separated from my skeleton, as if I was split in half, looking up and down at once. Looking at myself in every direction. I tried to tell him to stop, and I, I suppose you can guess what happened next.”

“How old were you?” asked Rachel. “You said you were in high school.”

Linda’s eyes flashed. “Fourteen. I still remember the blood on his . . .” Rachel flinched, and Linda redirected. “It was the first time I thought about killing someone.”

Silence came. Marcus settled a hand on Linda’s, and his eyes were dark with unsaid words, dark memories. Rachel imagined this wasn’t even the second time he’d heard about this. The way his mouth twisted, Rachel could almost say he empathized.

Rachel thought about how, because support from people as a whole was impossible, the victims needed to turn to murder for justice, but it wasn’t empowering; it was sad, how alone they were, alone with bitterness and anger others would shun because it was too much, because forgiveness was easier for everyone else. They were so alone they needed to shed blood as the only way to survive, whether they healed or not. Therapy was for white people with cash. Insurance was for people with cash. Medicine was for people who wouldn’t be labeled as “the angry brown one, always trouble.”

Yet she had to admit she felt satisfied with seeing what others could only have as fantasy: Mike’s shock and fear, maybe a twinge of regret as the knife went through him.

“Did you kill him?” Rachel asked, nails biting into the chair.

Linda met her eyes. “I know this might disturb you, that I shouldn’t say this, that you might think I’m a monster, but I am who I am.” No smiles, no

dears. Goosebumps prickled Rachel's arms, like she was seeing the Linda she was never meant to see. With the skin torn back, she was seeing all the parts clicking, all the nerves firing as Linda balanced what she showed to the world.

You can't be a monster. You're my mom.

(If you're a monster, so am I.)

"Go ahead," Rachel said, the new strawberry in her mouth souring. "It's your story." She should've said more, should've been more than a listener. Not only was Lindvulnerable, but Rachel could relate to this trauma. The humiliation, desperation, anger.

Linda ran a finger along a crack in the table. "A week later, I lured him in the woods for a second wind. And after, I wore his face as a mask." The strawberry rolled out of Rachel's mouth. "It's really quite unhygienic, but I was young and inexperienced."

A mask. Rachel paused. She knew Linda could be cruel, given the fact she killed people, but to hear that she did something like that made

her stomach churn more. Linda was watching her, and the woman's shoulders shifted, looking rounder, softer for Rachel's sake.

"And no one ever found him?"

Linda shrugged, a move she made graceful, like a cat slinking on the back of the couch. "Not that I'm aware. I had the good mind to put a shovel where I led him, so I buried him, and he safely decomposed. I threw the shovel in the creek."

Rachel opened her mouth and pointed in the general direction of the creek.

"No, another, the Atlanta suburbs."

"No one looked for him? Asked you questions?"

"Oh, they did, look for him, but our relationship was a secret because I was, let's say, a different skin color than the sort of girl he'd admit to dating." With a bitter smile, Linda added, "Then, I liked it. It was thrilling being the 'secret' girlfriend. So, no one knew I was tied to him. I'm sure they thought the possible killer or kidnapper was older and male, if he

hadn’t run away. He looked the kind of boy the police would actually try to save or avenge, though.”

Avenge. That word again. Rachel should’ve been horrified about the murder, but it was same old, same old. Taking back power after something horrifying happened. When no one else would care. All along, she had accused Linda of not understanding her, and *that* gnawed at her. That and the mask thing. “What happened to your mother?” Rachel asked. “Did she . . .”

Linda’s smile fell, a fog smoking her eyes. “As far as I know, she’s still alive.”

“Do you ever call her?”

“No, in case—in case I wrap her up in something she shouldn’t be exposed to.”

“So she doesn’t know about . . . any of this? What you do now, what happened with your . . .”

“Nothing.”

Rachel could only look at Linda with what she hoped came through as maxed out pity. Because she knew no words would really say anything. No words to take back all her anger and disappointment when she thought Linda was being patronizing when she tried to relate to her. Linda gave her a small, unhappy smile, patting her hand. Comforting Rachel when she was the one who should’ve been comforted. By Rachel. Marcus . . .

Marcus looked at no one, his thumb scraping against a nick in the table. When he spoke, it was like he was doing his own eulogy.

“When I was a boy,” he began, “I lived with my aunt—both of my parents died when I was young. My life was—relatively normal, but I was between two worlds. My aunt put me in what she called ‘white schools’ to ‘raise me right’.” Raise him right, raise him white. “So I needed to learn what voices to use in these spaces. I went to a mixed church, and when I was thirteen, there was a man there who caught my aunt’s attention, and eventually she trusted him alone with me.”

Rachel’s chest ached from holding her breath, watching Marcus’ thumbs rub together in little circles. She wondered if the friction would scratch his skin off like how, in science class, she learned friction wore and slowed

things down. A second became two seconds, and two seconds became thirty.

“One evening, he . . . I . . .”

He covered his mouth like Rachel did when she was trying not to throw up. Linda, eyes tortured, leaned her head on his shoulder, and he rested his cheek on her hair. Rachel imagined them falling together till the friction made them dust.

Rachel stood, left ankle popping. Walking lightly, like she was sneaking, she went to Marcus’ other side and offered the same comfort she’d been given, a hand on his shoulder. And Marcus did something she never thought she’d see him do: he wept.

“I couldn’t cry about it,” was all he said into his palm, and Rachel understood.

She knew that she hardly saw any men cry, and how men like Marcus were always told to be stoic, strong, and she wondered even with all the stereotypes he broke, if he still felt compelled to kill because society has taught him that violence was the only way to be strong. It had been taught by his abuser, by all the movies of strong white men shooting down those who captured, killed, and raped women, mostly white women, since they were the ones seen as always virtuous, always needing protection. Girls like Rachel needed to be stone-faced. Fire.

They were the dragons, never the princesses. Medusa, not Helen of Troy. And being Medusa could be powerful till you got your head cut off and everybody clapped.

And Marcus, here. This man with his crossword puzzles and quiet. A nerd, Rachel would have called him like she called her sixth-grade science teacher who looked exactly like him and, because he didn’t raise his voice or show his teeth, the boys in school called him “fag” and “pussy.”

Marcus was crying, and she couldn’t do anything, no matter what she went through. She had to say something. Something inspirational. Hopeful. Something like, “You’re both so strong because of what you went through.” But it was a load. She never felt strong, not once; she thought the lightest gust of wind would snap her spine in half like a lollipop stick. There was no

way she could say one sentence and make the whole conversation do a one-eighty.

She couldn’t be the person to make this right. The avenger, the Charles Bronson, who got to be the hero against the black and brown men he found an excuse to kill. She thought her heart would fall out of her. She wasn’t strong, ever.

And why did they have to be? Strong, some would call her, the woman’s strength to keep breathing after she was raped and humiliated repeatedly. It wasn’t fair. Throughout American history, she heard all the words to describe people like her: sturdy, hardy, strong. They were the same bullshit excuse words, smugly given, to justify putting them in chains because they were supposedly built to pick cotton all day and would be whipped if they broke or cried. Words given by those in a Nation built on God’s love for me while its soldiers raped nuns and burned churches to the south of them.

Rachel, Linda, Marcus.

They were told the lie that they were built to endure.

Work.

Suffer.

Shocking and bloody, that was the world they reaped.

And it was never okay. It would never be okay. But . . .

In a vicious world, the only way Linda and Marcus found peace was violence, to commit violences like the ones they’d been dealt. Not even that. A knife to the throat was a mercy compared to what they’d been through. They weren’t monsters; they only coped with it all the only way they could. Defensively. They took back power and re-established order. When the only tools you were given were knives, no one should be shocked when someone gets stabbed.

And Rachel would take these two flawed people who understood her over the entire world. If they did bad things to a bad world, so what? She’d rather have two “bad” people who loved her than a hundred “good” people who abused and neglected her. The world she’d lived in as a child was the barbaric one, and it’d stolen the few people who loved her. But she could reclaim that lost love and reclaim herself. She could be together with the

two people who would teach her how to survive. Together in silence, blood, sin.

Cannibalism was as American as apple pie and fried Oreos. As early as first grade, Rachel grew up with teachers telling her she needed competitive standardized test scores to get anywhere, that everyone sitting around her was competition. That it was a dog-eat-dog world. Survival of the fittest. If you failed, you'd be pushed out, and that was what you deserved for being weak. All your fault, all her fault. Despite all that, Linda and Marcus had embraced her without leaving her hurting in the cold.

Later that day, before her Shakespeare lesson, Rachel asked Linda to help with her hair. They sat on the couch instead of the bed, and Linda hummed as she combed the teeth of her brush through Rachel's curls.

Rachel hadn't liked how they didn't understand, how Linda said too much, how Marcus said too little. How blunt or evasive they could be. How she would spend hours in silence, and she wondered how they couldn't hear her heart screaming, echoing off the walls. And here she was, a victim and survivor like them, in their place and almost totally silent. A tear escaped her eye.

Linda paused. "Did I snag a tangle? Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

Though her throat hurt, Rachel said, "I feel bad. I was dismissive about what you went through. I said you couldn't understand, when you . . ."

Linda's voice shook. "Don't. Please. We didn't tell you all of that to make you feel guilty. You did nothing wrong. You were in pain, and it was consuming you. How could you've known what I went through?"

Like before, Linda was still, not wanting to impose, or something. Rachel wrapped her arms around her, and even when her heart was heavy enough to fall and stuff her left sock, for the first time in years, she felt free.

That Christmas was the best one she had had in years. There was no tree or wreath, but the room was warm and orange and gold. It felt good to get a book that wasn't a lesson about her changing body, even if it was *Tracking for Beginners: Catching Prey with Ease!* with a summary that began, *Tracking is a difficult task, especially when many animals walk the same ground. However, with this guide* . . . After, she'd walked in the snow, memorizing the landmarks, Linda and Marcus not far behind.

For her birthday, which Linda felt guilty for missing, she got twice the chocolate cake, and Marcus gave her an afghan, just for her. She was in, too immersed in the smiles and comforts of having a permanent home and bed to pay attention to anything Linda and Marcus did once she shut her door.

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“WHAT ARE YOU doing here?”

Davey startled. She’d been caught. “Uh . . . I didn’t want . . .”

Shit. Rachel’s hands stalled on the frame. She just couldn’t stay away, could she? Davey—there was something about her. She was a pain, but God, Rachel didn’t want her to end up like all the other ones.

“Let me in,” Davey said.

“No. What are you doing here?”

“Why do you think?”

She had a death wish. “How did you even get here?”

The other woman’s voice rose. “Who cares? You’re gonna let me—”

Waving her hand to hush her, Rachel said, “Okay, fine, just for two seconds.”

Rachel helped her in, so she wouldn’t flop against the headboard. Once Davey was upright, Rachel asked, “How did you get here? I didn’t hear anyone drive up. You couldn’t have walked . . .”

“That doesn’t matter.” Davey’s brow settled in a grim line. “You know, I’m not stupid.”

Only stupid people come here, Rachel thought, despite the guilt. “I . . . I don’t . . .”

“Cut the shit. You know something, and I saw the way your mom looked at me, like I was some sort of snack.”

Rachel gulped.

“Look at me. Rachel. Rach.” Rachel started. It was weird to hear someone who wasn’t Linda say her name, and Davey did it a lot. “Would

your mom know where Noah is? Would she hurt him? Do you think your dad . . .”

“I don’t know.”

“She could have him. Shit, he could be in your cabin! Can you look and meet me—hell, I don’t know.” Her voice broke. “Help me. Please. You have to know this is all messed up, even if he was your dad. You just—all I want is to find Noah. That’s it, and then I’m gone.”

“What makes you think I know anything? If my mom or dad were keeping someone in our home, I’d know. Maybe—maybe he just got lost in the woods. Maybe he’ll turn up at your grandma’s. You can’t stress yourself this much.”

“Listen. There’s no way in hell I’m letting his parents think he’s missing, possibly dead. They’re too good to go through that.”

As if Rachel couldn’t loathe herself more, she did, but this wasn’t about her. She had helped Mom and Dad kill Noah because she thought he was like Mike, Tom or Jake. And that meant Davey would suffer if she found out what happened; she would suffer anyway.

“I can’t do anything,” Rachel said.

“Why?”

“Lower your voice.”

“Like hell I will,” Davey said, nevertheless lowering her voice as she said it.

“Because I can’t lose anyone else.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“It does—”

“You need to go!” Rachel jumped at her own words and listened for Linda. Nothing. Quieter, she said, “Just go. Save yourself.”

“So you *do* know something.”

“I know you’re not supposed to be here—”

“Just tell me—”

“—I *know* everything was fine. I was happy, actually okay for once, till you—”

Davey stilled, and Rachel’s heart plummeted when she looked to the side, glimpsing the shadow in the doorway.

Linda. Clothes rumpled, arms crossed, and Rachel felt dizzy when she saw the glint in Linda’s lower hand. Her eyes were swollen from tears and an interrupted nap. Davey was frozen, apparently not having planned this far.

“Rach,” Linda said, deathly, carefully quiet, “what is this?”

Rachel looked between Linda and Davey, realizing that this was it. She had no choice. Davey would die, and she would just stand by and let this happen.

“Mom,” Rachel said, voice hiccupping, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Linda waited, and Rachel felt all the eyes crawling on her; four felt like four hundred little legs crawling inside her skin, clicking their teeth on her bones.

“Mom.” Rachel crossed her arms over herself. “Yesterday, I was at the creek, and . . .”

Linda’s amber eyes narrowed to slits. She didn’t understand; she couldn’t. “What? Rach, why is this girl . . .”

“I’m . . .” Rachel needed to think fast godshitfuck she needed to— “She’s my girlfriend.”

Linda blinked. Davey blinked. The world blinked.

“Oh?” Linda said, sounding genuinely surprised. *Thanks. I can have weird relationships too, you know.* “I had no idea, especially since you rarely go outside the cabin. It’s not exactly the most opportune way to find a date.”

“It’s a pretty recent thing. Quick.” Rachel looked to Davey, who nodded.

“Yeah, quick.”

“Didn’t you two just meet?” Linda asked, cocking her head. “I’m not one who can speak much on getting together too quickly, but this does seem

rather swift, dear.”

“Really quick. I’m bi, Mom. Bisexual.”

Linda crossed her arms. “Okay, but why is she in our home? Dani, how did you find us? Rachel’s never brought a visitor—at least, she’s never told me if she has.” Linda’s eyes flickered to Rachel, and it was horrifying how unreadable they were.

Davey said, “I . . .”

Linda interrupted, “You stowed away, didn’t you? Under the tarp.”

Rachel stiffened. “No, she—”

“That’s rather clever. I’m glad Rachel has a smart partner.” “I’m second-guessing the whole ‘smart’ thing,” Davey muttered.

The wind howled outside. Linda smiled. “First meetings are always so awkward, aren’t they? Luckily, it’s dinner time.”

Rachel’s blood went cold. When she tried to swallow, the lump was stuck in her throat.

“I’m stuffed, ma’am. I should probably go. Sorry to wake you,” said Davey.

“Mom, we’ve already eaten.”

Linda clapped her hands together. She was trying so hard to be the old Linda, but her hair was disheveled, and shadows rimmed her eyes. “Oh, come now. I can’t let you bring home someone and not properly receive them.”

Rachel balled her hands into fists.

When they went into the kitchen, it was yellower than usual, and the table surface was cold. When Rachel leaned forward, her throat spasmed. A smell like seasoned pork roast curled in the air. She was going to throw up. Linda hummed something Rachel could almost place. Maybe she had dreamed it once.

What was Linda doing? Did she know? Her eyes held a kernel of suspicion.

Davey tapped her fingers across from Rachel. Their gazes met, and the message was as clear as the thinnest spider web.

I don’t know what’s happening, but we’re fucked.

The wan golden light gave everything a sickly look. At the head of the table, Linda—looking as weak as she'd ever been, except in her eyes—set down two dishes: one for Rachel, and one for Davey. It really did look like a swirl of pork roast with some chopped carrots, little orange dissected fingers, tossed in as a joke.

Without setting a plate down for herself, Linda sat with her hands folded under her chin. "It's really much better when it's been in the crockpot all day and not thawed so quickly, but this was such short notice. I'm really glad we can share this moment."

"I'm not hungry," Rachel replied, not even able to look at the food, only at Davey's confused expression. What she wanted to say was *What game are you playing*?

"I—oh no! I forgot your silverware!" Linda tapped a little rhythm on the table and stood. "I'm really a mess. I should have freshened up before this, you know, more than the lipstick"—smeared—"and to think you'd eat without anything to . . . I wish I'd gotten some candles out, maybe lavender—or something evergreen."

Rachel said, "It's okay, really."

Linda walked over to the counter, and the clinking of the silverware drawer set Rachel's teeth on edge. Meanwhile, Davey pulled something out of her meat.

A string of hair.

When Linda came back, intently watching, she set the forks and knives by the plates as if nothing was happening.

"Oh, sorry," Linda said airily. "My husband—who sadly passed yesterday—was the one who'd check for hair during cooking. Some animals are hairier than others."

Davey's mouth moved as she studied the hair. It was blond, ghostly in the pale winter sunlight. As Linda slinked by her, Davey shook her hands out and jerked away from the table, chair scraping against the floor. "Jesus. Jesusjesus*jesusjesus* . . ."

"I killed him," Rachel blurted, and what happened next was as if they were all in water.

Both Linda and Davey's eyes—Davey's wet, terrified eyes—snapped to her.

Meeting Linda's eyes, she said, "I killed Marcus."

After several seconds, Linda clattered knee-first to the floor, staring, mouth moving with unsaid words, curses strung together with clay, blood, bones, secrets. "No, you're lying, trying to provoke me. stop lying, stop trying to convince me of—whatever you think will make me hurt you. Because I won't, ever."

"I did, I hurt him—"

"Stabbed him?"

"Yes. To protect her, and I did it because what you do hurts me. It hurts me that you hurt others."

"She's telling the truth," Davey said. "Shut

up," Linda snapped, "shut your—"

Davey said, "Your sicko husband tried to kill me, and—"

Linda rose a finger. "Don't. Shut up."

"Why?" replied Davey. "So you can keep everything like it is while someone is missing?"

Standing, clothes more rumpled than ever, Linda said to Rachel, "Even after you helped us h—"

No, no, bad, very bad. "—I realized," Rachel said, "look at Davey, she hasn't done anything. Really look at her."

"She *sneaked* here. When we—you never said anything. Never showed hesitation." Linda's expression softened, her voice low and gentle. "You didn't kill him. You wouldn't. He loved you, and you loved him. Besides, I don't remember you taking a knife."

The denial hurt the most because a part of Rachel wanted to agree, say she was just kidding. Somehow have Davey disappear and still be alive without ruining what she had. Linda's eyes were strained with a redness Rachel never saw before, a desperation breaking the practiced carefulness she cultivated for years.

Rachel shifted her head, and out of the corner of her eye, Davey was tightly wound, ready to bolt when she needed to flee for her life.

Linda kept trying. "You can't be—you mean that you feel responsible because he was out looking for you. Protecting you. That must be it."

Rachel clamped her eyes shut. What would Mama say, if she were here. Or Papa? What had been the thing Marcus had done for her that was so

effective, that allowed her to roll out of bed and throw away her shell?

The truth: “I stabbed him. I didn’t mean to, but it happened.” “You’re lying,” Linda said, stray tears falling. The yellow light made her eyes blaze, fierce as liquid gold, burning Rachel. “You’ve always tried to push me when you thought you deserved to suffer. Is this what this is?”

“Why would I lie about this, of all things?”

Davey said, “She’s—”

Linda said, “Do *not* speak.” Over Davey’s next words, which were less than pleasant, she pressed Rachel, “Why? Why would you assault him? Kill him? He wouldn’t—he never would’ve laid a hand on you.”

Rachel wanted to curl back into herself. “I said—he tried to kill her.” Linda stared, unblinking, a gray pall filming her eyes. “And? When that boy—” Linda jolted up, leaning on the table for support before straightening, and though Rachel and Davey were taller, she towered over them both. Rachel looked for an escape route for Davey, but with dawning cold creeping in her veins, she realized Linda had the cards, the dice, the whole table. No matter what she did, Rachel was small and nothing in the face of a titan like her mother. After killing Marcus and discovering Rachel’s betrayal, she realized nothing was left for Linda but her wrath.

Rachel said, “You went in my room to hurt someone.”

“I went there to protect you. Like I’ve always done.” Ouch. If the stakes weren’t high, Rachel would’ve commented on how strange it was that, in this moment, Linda chided her with that Passive Aggressive Parent tone of a child who just couldn’t find it in themselves to help their weary parents with the dishes. Linda looked at her with desperate hope. “You wouldn’t kill him for—you wouldn’t kill at all. You—I know you. The blood . . . you wouldn’t if it meant . . .”

Rachel looked away, breaking something she couldn’t see or hear, but felt in the deepest parts of her. Linda advanced with her eyes set on Davey, and Rachel maneuvered between them, clattering over the table, sending dishes and food scattering.

“Rachel,” Linda said, emphasis on the first syllable, “she doesn't deserve your regard.”

Rachel's muscles ached, a pain settling deep in her chest. As short as she was, Linda felt giant. Like she'd bulldoze Rachel, swallow Davey and spit her out, daintily rubbing her fingers against her teeth after till they squeaked.

The blue shadows in Linda's visage spread. Rachel wasn't sure if the shadows on Linda came from the room, or if the shadows in the room came from Linda. "Rachel. Move."

"No," Rachel said, and with heat rising in her throat, she said it louder: "*No.*"

"Hey, I don't want a fight," Davey said, hands up. "I don't want any trouble, ma'am."

"Those are *clearly* what you want, and I am more than happy to oblige."

"I just want to find my boyfriend. And then I'll leave."

"Boyfriend," Linda said.

"Yes?" Davey replied. "Noah. Blond. Tall."

Linda eased back, face unreadable, her eyes, once full of emotion and honest affection, becoming black ice. "Rachel, Rach, you said something about hearing the doe. It's funny to think you tracked her, and now she's tracked you."

Rachel started, "Um—"

Davey sucked in a breath. "Doe? I'm not a deer." To Rachel, she said, "You . . . heard me? Followed me? When? When I was with Noah?"

Rachel stared at her sneakers, which were once white before Georgia clay stained them.

With her free hand, Linda tapped her chin. "Hm. Blond, tall. Blue eyes, freckles?"

Rachel swallowed, a cluster of heat threatening to burst out of her lungs. "Li—Mom. Don't." Davey looked ready to bolt.

"Don't what?" Linda said, eyes piercing Rachel. "I only want to help this poor girl find her boyfriend, so they can go home together."

Rachel said nothing, trying to think of a way to defuse this conversation, to go back to how things were. She was being judged on both sides, and on both sides, she failed.

You were okay with all this for years. This is what you deserve.

She doubted Linda would want Davey as another daughter; Davey had a family already. And Linda wasn't the sort of person to give up once she had a goal in mind. Even when Rachel rebuffed her, she hadn't stopped till Rachel considered her a mother; if she wanted to kill someone right in front of her daughter, she wouldn't stop till she succeeded.

Linda said easily, like recounting a day at the library, "We killed him, so *we* could eat him. The three of us."

Davey's voice was high with panic as she stared at Rachel. "We— you —"

Rachel said, "I didn't—"

Linda spat, "Are you really going to turn your back on what we did together as a family?"

"What did you do?" Davey said. "You ate him? Ate him? Fuck, fuck, oh my God—she's playing, she's playing me." Rachel stared, and Davey put her head in her hands. "God, no, no, nononono."

"Well, I'm lying," Linda said lightly. "Mea culpa. We packaged him up in the freezer. Barbecued parts of him, the hind parts, but had to set those aside. Haven't had the chance to—"

Rachel started, "I—I—"

"You were there, Rach," Linda said, blunt as a mallet. "Tell her what you did."

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DAVEY'S FACE WENT hard. "Tell me." "I didn't . . ." Rachel started.

"You did," Linda finished.

Davey's gaze was unblinking. "What did you do to him? What did you do? Please tell me he's alive. That he's not, you didn't . . . God, God ..."

Shitshitshitshit.

Linda stood still, and it was as if the woman who brushed her curls, held her hair back when she puked, and hugged her when she broke down had died. And all Rachel could do was stand as the scales swung out of her favor.

She mourned. No matter how betrayed Linda felt, Rachel couldn't help the cutting sting in her ribs.

"You can't believe a word she's saying," Rachel said to Davey. Linda's eyes burned into her. "I'm the most honest between the two of us. For years, I've cared for you, and I never saw you as a liar." Rachel snapped, "Oh, you're disappointed now. Didn't mean to lower your moral standards."

Linda's scowl deepened.

"What did you do?" Davey said, and Rachel couldn't help the look she gave Davey, what she imagined as a wounded and scared look. "You know something. You knew something the moment we met. I saw it. That look you have—what is it? What happened?"

"Go ahead," Linda said, "tell her."

Rachel set her jaw, speaking to Linda without looking at her. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m tired of you pretending, of acting like someone you’re not. You belong in *this* world, not hers.”

“Even after I killed your husband?” Rachel asked.

As if she didn’t hear Rachel, Linda replied, “Go ahead, tell her how I sliced his throat open, and he bled like the pig he was. And you watched.”

“I didn’t,” Rachel squeaked. “I didn’t.”

“Tell her how we cooked him. Tell her how you helped us find him.” This was it. She was cornered. All she had was the truth after trying to keep it from everyone. She could lie, but Linda would chase her deeper into the bushes.

Rachel blurted at Davey, who looked like she was about to be sick, “I tracked him for them.”

“Tracked?” Davey said, voice high.

“Before I saw you by the creek, I found him and you, but you walked away before we could . . .”

“Is that how you found me on that rock. Tracking?”

“No, I wasn’t thinking about . . .”

“What,” Davey said, looking at her with the purest disgust, “killing, eating someone? *Eating him?*”

“Quite the hors d’oeuvres,” Linda said simply, “or whore d’oeuvres, as it were.” If Rachel wasn’t so completely seated in loathing toward herself, she would’ve been beside herself at Linda’s timing of the cannibal Dad Joke.

You would’ve laughed a year ago. A nervous laugh, a stop-you’re-embarrassing-me laugh.

Davey covered her mouth, but before she could stop it, she turned to the side and threw up, although she tried to keep a constant eye on Rachel and Linda.

In her stare, Rachel saw herself. Complacent. Quiet. Letting the love she’d been given weigh more heavily than her morals. Not the victim. Just the victimizer. Someone who had helped killers find an innocent— but was he really?

No matter if he was or wasn’t, Noah would’ve died. He did die.

“If you kill anyone,” Rachel said to Linda, “kill me.”

Linda leaned back, actually disturbed by something. “I . . .”

Rachel swallowed and looked down at her hands, her palms. Like so long ago, they were changing, the lines deeper, separate from herself. “You can’t. Why not? You’ve killed—I don’t even know how many. Why am I different, especially after killing the love of your life to help a stranger?”

“You’re trying to provoke me, again,” Linda said with an edge, yet that fading softness lingered, a flake before it joined the hard ground.

“Go ahead,” Rachel said. Linda didn’t move. “You think I’m you. I’m not. I never can be.”

Coldly, Linda replied, “The only ways I would say you weren’t like me in the past were that you were quiet and never killed anyone. One is dashed now.”

Davey’s eyes filled with tears, and Rachel forced herself not to duck her head. For a moment, Davey covered her mouth again, and the horror in her eyes was both vacant and full, nothing and everything. Rachel had been wrung dry and doused in a new, icier world. “Please tell me she’s—you’re lying. Please tell me he’s not dead, that you didn’t . . .”

Linda said, “Do you want to see him? Come here.”

“No, no—don’t touch m—” Linda grabbed Davey who, to her credit, was twisting out of her grip. She was far taller than Linda, but it was as if, despite her smallness and tiredness, Linda’s sheer will consumed everything, eclipsed anything in Davey. Rachel was running over, trying to pull Linda away, but it was like holding water.

“Stop! Get off her!”

“Oh, but she’s tried so hard to find him, coming all this way!”

Rachel couldn’t remember how they all got to the work room, only how Linda had her fist in Davey’s hair, how she propped open the freezer door with ease. The chemical lemon smell invaded her head. This was the room where everything had changed, where Rachel realized she could trust her new parents, and there was a body. Dismembered and wrapped in plastic. Hands, feet, organs, neatly packaged and stacked like firewood. A head where she could faintly make out eyelashes.

Davey shrieked and wept was thrust close to Noah's body parts. The light flickered. Linda held her steady. Davey's tears fell on the plastic. She screamed into her hands; Rachel wanted to do it too, but she was frozen, and so was the world. A world that had been strange and dangerous, unrecognizable.

While Rachel couldn't bring herself to look away from Davey, she said nothing to her, and it was answer enough.

"Don't worry," Linda said to Davey, holding the knife out below her chin, "I'll make it quick if you don't move."

Gasping, with a sudden burst of strength, Davey stumbled backwards out of Linda's grip, as if Linda had decided to let her go. Her back knocked into the surgery table.

"Can't you see she's hurting?" Rachel said.

Linda threw a hand out and pointed it back at herself. "*I'm* hurting, and no one has ever cared about us." Her anger was justified, but . . .

Davey rocked against the table. "Stop. Stop. Stop it." Davey lowered both hands, and they arched and straightened like surprised spiders. Her mouth curled in a snarl, and Rachel stiffened further, going from chilly water to ice. It had been a long time since someone looked at her with contempt, and never this sort.

Davey said, "You led me here to die."

Okay. That wasn't fair. "No, I didn't! I didn't tell you to come here." "You knew." Davey scoffed, which shouldn't have hurt, but it did. "Right, nothing's ever your fault, is it? You think you're better than her because you don't stab anyone? Better than the asshole who tried to

kill me?"

Linda shook with fury. "He didn't do anything. He was—you shouldn't have—you *bitch*—"

"He tried to kill me!" Davey shook her fists. "He had it coming. He killed . . . killed, oh God."

"Must you whine?" Linda's sharp smile made her eyes wider and brighter. "Dear, don't presume. Like I said, I had the pleasure of slicing his throat myself. Marcus just kept him from running."

Davey's hands curled. "Noah didn't do anything, but I bet your husband helped cut him up, didn't he? What a great guy. Such a shame he died

’cause he couldn’t handle a rock and a girl half his size.”

Rachel grimaced. Linda, bowing like a threatened cat, surged forward, and Rachel, moving her body with no real elegance, no deadly grace, slammed Linda into the wall. Linda fell, and Davey flew past Rachel. Rachel ran to the doorway, and she heard Davey clumsily grabbing at things on the counter, a slick noise—

The knife rack.

Linda clattered upward, going up so fast that Rachel didn’t see any of her bent limbs straighten; it was like she willed herself to stand, as easy-moving as water.

Their eyes met as the front door yawned open in the other room, and Rachel should’ve stopped Linda, should’ve stepped in the doorway—

Linda was gone.

In a single spurt, Rachel rushed to the open front door and Linda, saving her strength, strode calmly onto the steps, feet crunching on the snow. It didn’t take long for Rachel to fly to her side and grab her elbow.

Rachel said, “Stop!”

“Get off—”

“Please, stop this, don’t—”

Rachel felt Linda strike her across the face before she realized what it was, before she fell to the snow—body first and mind last. The cold seeped into her hair. Her cheek burned, the stinging kind, and she realized Linda’s wedding ring had sliced open her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Linda said above her, voice shaking. “God, I’m—I really am. I would never . . .” As she lurched to her knees and held her head, Rachel’s vision went as gray as the darkening evening. “That’s it, good girl. Just go—we’ll talk . . .” She trailed off, and Rachel couldn’t tell if her voice was unstable because of sorrow or rage.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him.” If anything would save Davey, it was this. And—it was true. She missed Marcus, and nothing could fix that.

“I know.”

That twisted Rachel’s heart, almost making her wish Linda hadn’t said it. At least if she knew this Linda wasn’t *her* Linda, it would be easier to fight

her. “Please don’t do this.”

Softly, Linda, her only family left, replied, “I have to.”

“Don’t go.”

When she blinked, Linda was going.

The whistling of the wind.

The fading crunch of Linda leaving her there.

Slumping on the steps, wobbling into a sitting position as her ankles cried out, Rachel saw the standoff at a slant. Davey had two steak knives, and she held them out clumsily. As she went backwards on the gravel driveway, she kept trying to edge backwards to the road, swaying with the packed snow slowing her, and Linda, like she was herding sheep, moved in a smooth arc to Davey’s side.

Davey, even with the knives, had eyes wide and so full they became little moons with what Rachel imagined was a darkly beautiful, but cold lake in the middle.

Don’t go into the woods. She’ll find you. Don’t—

Davey burst into the woods, making snow fall from the bushes, and Linda followed with her shoulders at ease. Rachel watched, blank, and something was purring beside her. Homie. With contentment, he was watching too with his harvest moon-eyes.

Rachel stood, dizzy, mouth hanging open, the growing darkness and migraine making her doubt what she just saw. Did they run to the left of the cabin, or the right? By the dogwoods, or the blackberry patch?

She shut her eyes and counted her breaths. She turned, hand on the knob, ready to let the cabin take her and chew on her for a bit.

She had let Noah die, and she ran when Marcus died. Always putting her back to others’ pain. A terrible taste swelled on her tongue, and her mouth was dry. When she blamed herself for her rape, she’d been wrong. Wrong to hate herself, as difficult as it was to accept she hadn’t had any control over what her foster brothers did, no matter how much she ran through her head what else she might’ve done.

But this, she needed to act on.

She let the knob go and plummeted into the snow, trudging forward. Following the carved tracks in the snow, she crept to the trees, scanning for

snapped twigs, disturbed leaves, and soon enough, even as the sun died, she could see the path, could even, from her memory, see the rocks Davey would swing around, the branches Linda would pull back.

She stepped farther into the crooning forest and saw wide strides mixed with trenches like someone had dragged themselves straight through before being able to run. Escape hampered by the snow, stumbling when they miscalculated how far it was for their feet to hit the ground.

And, on a briar patch, blood.

Her nose ached where it hit the thinner part of the snow. The trees blurred and multiplied around her in the deep evening shadows, and she had trouble finding the footprints.

Remember what they taught you.

Don't rush, Marcus would say, guiding her, hand on her shoulder, pointing out details she'd never have seen on her own, being the sort of person to look in the abstract.

I need to go.

She was frozen in place.

I need to run.

The Thing-of-the-Woods would come for her.

It was coming. Her chest tightened when the stench of corpses flooded her nose and mouth. Her feet sank deeper into the ground.

Run.

She couldn't tell if the scream she heard in the distance was real or in her head. Something wet was on her mouth. Snow melted on her skin. She touched her lip and pulled her fingers away. Red.

Something roared, shaking the ground and making snow collapse from the trees.

It's coming for me. She looked at where Davey's footsteps had revealed the hard ice and red ground.

Somewhere in the distance, someone screamed again. Davey.

Runrunrunrun.

No, she couldn’t go. She should take Homie inside and do like she always did: go to bed and pull the covers over herself.

I can’t do this.

She needed to stay put. Stay here. Listen to the one person who loved her.

The person chasing an innocent.

The killer.

I can’t—

Following Linda and Davey’s tracks, she ran.

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RACHEL'S HEART WAS in her throat as she went, and soon, as the trees narrowed, she struggled to follow the tracks, needing to squint and slow down when she had no time to do so.

A low bubbling.

The creek.

Sure enough, in the corner of her eye, she saw blackness moving like a cascade of fallen hair, a mini-waterfall. As she went, she crawled over two trees fallen together as one, hands finding purchase on the fat vine twisted around them. The creek would bend, and she'd find the deeper half.

A roar, closer. Snow clomped by her feet, the branches above trembling.

Dead leaves crackling and rusting.

Davey screaming, "Get off me!"

Linda cried out. Rachel couldn't tell if it was rage, pain, or both.

It sounded like Davey was fighting for her life, thank God. All the trees, thinned by winter, looked the same and split her vision. She swore she wasn't getting any closer to the other women. She was going in circles for an eternity, not finding anything she could track. Limbo. She had lost the way when she found footsteps winding in such a way it seemed like Davey had ran around and around, rather than in a straight line. Rachel twisted in a clumsy circle.

The blood pounding in her ears muffled the next shout, so she couldn't say who it was. Rustling to her right. As she followed the sound, the muddled tracks gave way to more distinct footprints, a path.

She ran, and what she saw froze her.

By the edge of a dark creek, Davey was on the ground—still breathing? Blood poured from her head. Above her, Linda had four long scratches down her cheek, going from deep to shallow. Linda turned, facing her. With a lump in her throat, Rachel saw a wound on her left side where Davey had gotten her.

Rachel shivered, and despite neither of them wearing a coat, they each stood their ground, and Linda didn't tremble even a little.

"You hit me," Rachel said, hand on her cheek, the sting darting under her fingertips. "We match, kind of."

The corners of Linda's eyes twitched. "You killed him." Her voice was a rasp.

"Out of all the things you could judge—nevermind. This stops. Now."

"It doesn't—close your eyes, Rach." Her voice was soft, pleading. It took Rachel aback.

"And what, you'll forget what I did? We'll just go back to be a normal family, roses and all?"

"Don't taste—" Linda put her hand to her face, suddenly looking ten years older. "Don't test me. Close. Your. Eyes."

Eyes on Davey's body, Linda lunged.

Rachel leapt.

Tangled together, they plummeted, crashing into a thin layer of ice. Freezing blackness swallowed Rachel. Linda's nails dug into her arms, and they thrashed. When Rachel opened her mouth, she sucked water into her lungs, and it burned her throat.

The creek was even deeper than she thought, and it felt like the murky blue-gray pulled them in more, numbed her to the bone. She counted each painful gulp, and no matter when she tried to stop, the water invaded. Became her.

Linda twisted and struggled, but the peat and water crushed her like it did Rachel; a fluid vise took hold of everything.

The thought of letting Linda sink came to mind. Linda was a murderer, and it wasn't exactly against the law for a killer to be executed.

Let go.

Cold raked through her, and she was exposed to something. A devil, a god of the woods. Rachel's gripped tightened on Linda, even when her mind blanked. But the more she tried to draw Linda close, the deeper they went.

She's a killer. She's only pulling you down.

Let her die.

Black fur on the surgery table, bleeding.

Complete the cycle.

Three graves, one small, two big.

Just let her go.

Rachel looked around the blackness, at Linda's eyes rolling back, her long hair reaching out to the bottom, and the bottom reaching back.

No.

And then the creek woke up and opened its eyes, hundreds of green-yellow eyes lining the bottom. Pouring out of the eyes, lightning bugs swarmed around Rachel and Linda. The bugs grew long, pink tongues, their eyes swelling, their legs writhing like boneless arms. They swung like hammocks, and then they swarmed, cocooning Rachel, nipping at her face and hands, going up her nose and in her mouth.

No!

A burst of heat flowed from Rachel's heart to her arms and legs. She thrashed at first. As her mind blinked, she scrambled, up, up, up, Linda in her arms.

Like lightning was in her palms, she broke the surface and dragged Linda and herself to the red-white bank. She retched cold water onto the snow, and the forest froze. She swore she saw hair in the water hardening to ice beneath her.

She looked down at the water, and there were no lights. Something came to the surface, something—white? With the balls of her feet, she dragged herself back, Linda still in her arms.

The creek bubbled, pouring horrors on itself. Rachel saw it clear as midday in the growing darkness. Skulls, fur, and guts of deer, bears, rabbits,

squirrels, bobcats, all dotting the creek like Spanish moss, like fungus. Some red things—hearts—beat and came to a head like boils, popping and spilling black. It smelled like death with an older, earthy stench unlike anything she saw when burying the birds or standing by as Linda buried Marcus. The water surged, tenting up.

Antlers. Dark fur. Green, glowing eyes.

Rachel dragged her and Linda away, and something—a swollen rope, intestines, snakes?—wrapped around Linda's leg, pulling her halfway in the water.

"No," Rachel said, gasping, clinging to Linda so hard she thought she heard bones snap. "I said no!"

Laughter.

You're so pretty for a . . .

Look up.
Down's
where the
Devil is.
"Stop."

light

This will heal.

LiGhT

Everyone's nervous the first time.

LIGHT

"Stop!"

You are so much more than
suffering, my love.

With one burst of strength, she pulled Linda up to her chest, digging her feet into the frozen clay and clambering back, revealing the pulsing tendril slithering around Linda's leg, creeping up her waist. Rachel's chest ached from exertion.

She wasn’t giving in or giving up. No more running.

Not now, not anymore.

She took Linda’s knife, fallen by her ankle, almost submerged in the yolky gore, and plunged it into the wet, writhing thing till her vision blurred and her entire mind shook and fell.

Linda’s body lost all tension, and the wet string of flesh sank into the water. Rachel collapsed on her back, Linda falling to the side, the snow seeping into their hair.

Rachel stared at the canopy, at the cluster of stars that blinked around.

Was it gone? Without any thought on it, Rachel laughed, tears spilling out of her eyes. Was she free?

Were they . . .

Rachel whipped her attention toward a low groaning, which brought her back to reality. She stood.

Davey moved to her hands and knees. When Rachel stepped toward her with an open hand, Davey jumped and stilled.

“Get . . .” Eyes rounded in a question, Davey looked at Linda’s body. Linda’s face was paler than it’d ever been, face drained. Rachel’s heart stuttered, thinking she was dead, that she’d drowned, but when Rachel bent to roll her over before she went to Davey, her chest rose and fell, water trickling out of her mouth and hardening to ice. “What did you do?”

“I kept her from killing you.” Rachel didn’t expect a thanks, not that she especially deserved one.

As Davey stood on her own, she stared at Linda like she was a snake waiting to strike. She opened her mouth, and then grimaced, clutching her head. “Head, fucking head.”

“Huh?” Rachel asked.

“My head.”

Not knowing what to do, Rachel hovered. “How bad is it?”

“It just hurts.”

“Oh, uh, there’s medicine back home?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Davey examined Linda again. “Holy shit, did you—” *I knocked her out. She was going to kill you.* Rachel wanted to say those, but

her mouth failed her, and she shivered, her hair sticking to her face, water running into her eyes and freezing on her skin.

Davey tilted her head when Rachel held Linda, pulling her arm over her shoulders like a drunk friend. “Shit, you, are you going to . . .” Davey followed Rachel as she slogged through the trampled snow, albeit at a reasonable distance from each other. “You can’t—you can’t—the police—fuck, who’ll believe us?”

Why is she still talking to me? Shouldn’t she try to kill me about now? It was the proper etiquette of things here.

“Where’re the knives you got from the kitchen?” Rachel asked.

“She pulled them out of my hand—it—it, the creek, I think, they fell there. I was so—they just slipped out, my hands, my hands were water. And she—she—I don’t know the word for it. It was like she was . . . you saved me from her, didn’t you? You saved me again.”

They were silent the rest of the way as dusk fully became night.

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Rachel set Linda on the master bed, and Linda's body molded to the sheets like her skin would melt on the blankets. It was only her moving chest that let Rachel know she hadn't died. After retrieving some cotton swabs, bandages, rubbing alcohol, and a needle full of propofol, Rachel sat by her, turning the lamp on, and injecting Linda with the sedative. Tending to the scrapes and scratches, Rachel helped Linda like she had helped her stuffed animals: as best she could. When it came to the knife wound on her side, which she tended to first, it soaked the sheets and bandages, staining and drying on Rachel's hands. She only hoped she did a good enough job.

With all the blood, her heart should've been trying to claw its way out, but it didn't. As Rachel rubbed the alcohol on the cheek scratches, the muscles in Linda's face twitched. Rachel pulled back, and Linda's eyes opened. They had nothing in them.

Linda's head lolled, eyelids fluttering. "Rach . . ."

"Yes?"

She smiled, and then grimaced. "I'm . . ."

"I know," Rachel replied. "Just rest, okay? I'll be back, and we can talk."

"Marcus loved you. I love you, you know that, don't you?"

Rachel cupped her cheek. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"Defeating me?"

No. Yes. "Learning how—much I can be."

And God, I want you to be happy. I wish we could be happy together.

"You, no, you were always . . ."

Rachel knew the word, and it still felt odd applying it to herself. She still remembered being at her most alone, sitting in the tub as the showerhead pelted water down on her and revealed more of the crimes done against her body. At the time, she hated her vulnerability, but now, she only wanted to wrap that younger Rachel up in a blanket and give her some hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. She wanted to tell her everything would be okay if she stayed alive, even on the days she didn't push or try anything at all, but she knew that then, it wouldn't have helped.

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“And you made me realize that,” Rachel said, clearing her throat when she broke up. “Both of you. So, thank you. For everything.”

Linda’s eyelids fluttered again, and then closed. “Did you see . . .” She trailed off, and Rachel thought she fell asleep.

“I did.”

“The eyes, the . . .” Linda murmured, breaths deepening. “Stay with me, little rabbit, please.”

“I will, Mom.”

After about ten minutes, content with the slow rise and fall of Linda’s chest, Rachel left all the supplies on the nightstand and stood, shutting off the lamp, the darkness making her shoulders heavy. She walked out and looked in the kitchen. Homie was licking the plates on the table clean.

She stood in the living room, inhaling the faint scent of mildew and lemons. Pain pricked her eyes. A hole between her shoulder blades. She was losing a piece of herself, and she hoped, in time, she’d find other pieces along the way. But, if she learned anything about life in her short years here, she knew no matter what she found, there’d always be that chasm, one of many.

Something slithered between her feet. She looked down.

Homie meowed, moon-eyes rounded in a question.

“Hey, boy,” Rachel said, smiling wetly. She picked him up and looked around at what she felt was the whole of the cabin staring at her.

She opened the front door, and closing it was like sealing a coffin.

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THEY NEVER WENT to the police. No one would believe them, they figured, and living through their ordeal was bad enough once. After a night at Davey's grandma's home, which was great because of the sugar cookies, but bad because of the nightmares, they fled Pendlewood. It'd be some years later when Rachel returned to the cabin, ends of her hair curling around her ears, college sweatshirt keeping her warm, newly picked up prescriptions of Prozac and Seroquel seated in the console. Davey stayed in the car at Rachel's request, not that Davey minded much, having spent hours standing by Rachel, curled into her by her grandmother's casket and headstone.

Throughout everything, Davey was warily supportive, which made her a saint, all things considered. It wasn't everyone who would take the girl who'd tracked down her boyfriend for her serial killer parents out to lunch. It definitely wasn't everyone who'd follow her to the OBGYN and hold her hand during the pap smear, saying it was okay when she couldn't last the first time. Davey was good at saying the right things, even when she'd never needed to go to the OBGYN.

"I miss them," Rachel would say.

"I know." And sometimes: "I miss him." They would hug. Sometimes Davey screamed in the night, and Rachel would coax a hand over her forehead, get a cold damp washcloth, hold back her hair when she got sick.

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They both suffered the acute guilt of survival, but they were together. No one else could know their pain, grief.

There were laughs, looks, and peaceful nights. There were nightmares, arguments, and hours of silence. It was better than it could've been, given the circumstances. Theirs was a relationship of ill convenience. Shared, clandestine ordeals, unspoken understandings stretching endless between them. Yet in each other, with the pain and grief, came the inception of when *you and me* became *us*. Luckily, Rachel thought the cat endeared her to Davey, though not so much the clumps of hair she carried in from the pet grooming shop after work.

Rachel was okay, sometimes. They were okay, sometimes.

The cabin wasn't okay.

It was ash, every inch of it besides the concrete foundation. All of it, even the afghans Marcus made Rachel. She leaned against a birch and wondered if Linda was inside when the cabin burned, wondered who set the match. Her chest hurt. She almost threw up, but kept her head straight, heart thumping in her ears. The worst scenario was that Linda had killed herself. Or someone had murdered her as she had murdered countless others. Or the knife wound Davey inflicted had been fatal after all.

As the day darkened, a lone lightning bug told Rachel with its bobbing pendulum flight that it was time to go, and she liked to think Linda had decided to burn away her old sins. That she went to work as a personal doctor where she read to children at the library on the weekends. Got a new cat, or six, since the mountains didn't have a shortage of strays. Maybe she went back to Atlanta, to a busy part of town, and helped the old lady in the adjacent apartment, waved at everyone she saw on the street. Maybe she found her mother, and they tearfully reunited. One day, as Rachel walked down the street with sheets of rain pelting her red umbrella, she swore she saw Linda's back, her hair curling down her blouse. Rachel ran, dropping the umbrella, but the swell of people consumed whoever she followed. When Davey asked where the umbrella went, Rachel said the wind swept it away.

At least five times a week, Rachel dreamed they met again and Linda, fully redeemed and remorseful, held her tight and wept against her shoulder, smelling of strawberries and chemical lemon cleaner. It was then Rachel would forgive and comfort her, give Linda the kindness she had granted her.

She would tell Linda about getting her GED and getting admitted to college, the stories she told the police when she just up and appeared after many years, how she had to pretend she didn't know where her foster brothers went. She'd ask why Linda never sought revenge for Rachel killing her husband, for abandoning her and taking her cat.

As she left Linda, as the still-standing cabin loomed in the rearview window, Rachel was lulled by the beat of tires crunching against dirt and gravel. Davey shuddered.

"It's fucking freezing," Davey said, bringing Rachel back. "Why aren't you shaking? You're soaking wet. All I got was snow on me, and I feel like an icicle. You two went swimming, it looks like."

"Lizard blood," joked Rachel. She was freezing actually, but she didn't feel like she had the right to complain. Small potatoes and all. "And I dried myself, sort of."

"But your arms are crossed." Davey leaned over, and Rachel stiffened as Davey messed with something behind her with one hand on the wheel. "There's a jacket on the seat."

"I'm not cold. I don't need—" Davey pulled the jacket from the back of the seat and dumped it over Rachel. "Er, thanks." Rachel peeled it away from her face, blanketing it over her.

"It works better if you put your arms through it and wear it." Rachel put her arms through the jacket with it draped from her chin to her thighs. "Okay," Davey said, eyes on the road, "I need to know: how did you survive living with two cannibals?"

"They were—they had their moments."

Davey said nothing, but Rachel heard everything. About her adoptive parents, the people who killed Noah. They were the kind of words Linda resented, but if Davey had said them aloud (as she probably would, later), Rachel would listen.

Davey started carefully, "Listen, I get that you were—you were in a bad situation. You needed to do whatever to survive." She hiccupped, cutting off a cough, or a sob. "But they ate people, people with lives and families and . . . and . . ."

Rachel rubbed a nail on the window glass, where on the other side a bug had met its end, splattering in a yellow-green splotch.

“You’re right.” And she had no idea how to make it up to anyone. “But when I lived in Atlanta, I was scared and powerless. They showed me I’m . . .” She didn’t want to quite say she was beautiful because of the scars, since that meant she was meant to be broken and exploited to have worth. That was wrong. Linda and Marcus had showed her that all along . . . “With words, they gave me the power to fight back. To live.” Not just that. They made her remember what Mama and Papa had done, the tools they gave her when she didn’t know what they were for.

Time passed with each crack in the road and tree; she wondered how long these trees had been around, watching people come in and never come out. Exposed, gnarled veins leading to a heartbeat she swore she heard under the grumbling of the country road. The trees always looked taller at night, but now, they seemed to shrink, smaller than Rachel remembered. The questions Davey spilled out in every pothole and flattened possum rolled over her again. Questions said, and then unsaid in the taut skin around her knuckles as she gripped the steering wheel, flinching and straightening again. Digging her fear and her life into the gray vinyl. Rachel didn’t need to hear the questions because, as a victim and survivor in equal stretches, they echoed with her own whale songs lost in the shuddering waves. For now.

Silence except for the tires battering the snow-slick road. On and on, four snakes eating themselves. Rachel’s mind drifted off, her eyes open, and she felt a thread tugging at her heart, leading back to the white, scowling trees. She could feel Linda stirring, feeling her pillow with dried saliva against her cheek, the cold beside her.

For once, the rabbit in Rachel was quiet. She opened her mouth and told her story. From the beginning, unabridged. She kept talking, and without another look back, she followed Davey into the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan is a writer and poet. Their poems and short stories have appeared in collections from Vamp Cat Mag, Honey & Lime, TL;DR Press, Z Publishing House, and Marias at Sampaguitas. Having previously worked as a social media intern and coordinator for their university writing center and Sundress Publications, they are currently a co-editor of fiction at *Exhume* and the social media and web editor for *Doubleback Review*. They are also the fiction editor for *Headlight Review*. They earned ther BA in English in 2017.

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